

St Patrick (A)  
(Ecclesiasticus 39:6-10 / Mt 13:24-32)  
17.03.2020

*If it is the will of the great Lord,  
the scholar will be filled with the spirit of understanding,  
he will shower forth words of wisdom,  
and in prayer give thanks to the Lord.*

Those words from today's first reading led me to think of Patrick, the man of God, filled with wisdom; Patrick who is forever remembered as the initiator of the great Christian movement that won for Ireland the appellation *Isle of Saints and Scholars*.

Although remembered as our *wise ancestor in the faith* – a man of great spiritual stature who gained a whole people for the Lord in quite an extraordinary way, without strong resistance – Patrick speaks of himself in a quasi-disparaging manner. Certainly he speaks of himself in a way that makes it clear that for him all the glory for whatever good he accomplished should be given to God and not be pinned on his personal talent.

Patrick considered himself to be neither a saint nor a scholar.  
I quote from his *Confessio*: *I, Patrick, am a sinner, the most awkward of bumpkins, the least of all the faithful, and the most contemptible amongst very many.*

If Patrick undertook to draw any attention to himself at all, by the composition of his *Confessio*, he explains why he wrote: [Because] *The Lord had mercy on my ignorance. Even before I knew him, He watched over me... He protected me and comforted me as a father would his son. So, I cannot keep quiet – nor should I – about the tremendous blessings and the grace that the Lord poured out on me.*

Elsewhere in the same text he states: *I was like a stone lying deep in the mud; but He that is mighty came and lifted me up in His mercy, and raised me to the top of the wall. That is why I ought to shout in a loud voice, and return something to the Lord for all His benefits here and in eternity, which the human mind cannot even begin to comprehend.*

Patrick considered any wisdom that was given to him to be a God-given gift.

There are words written by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians that would have resonated well with Patrick. I can imagine him sharing these thoughts with his first companions on the Irish mission: *Notice among yourselves, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you who follow Christ have big names or power or wealth. Instead, God has deliberately chosen to use the ideas the world considers foolish and of little worth in order to shame those people considered by the world as wise and great. He has chosen a plan despised by the world, counted as nothing at all, and used it to bring down to nothing those the world considers great so that no one anywhere can ever brag in the presence of God.*

So what was Patrick's secret? Where did he draw his wisdom and his strength from?

He shares his secret with us in his *Confessio*: *Many times during the day I would pray. More and more the love of God and the fear of God came to me [in and through this prayer], so that my faith was strengthened and my spirit was moved. In a single day I would pray as much as a hundred times, and nearly as often during the night, when I was staying in the woods and in*

*the mountains. I would rouse myself before daylight to pray, whether in snow, frost or rain; it made no difference, and I felt no bad effects. Because the Spirit in me was fervent, I knew no sluggishness.*

Prayer was Patrick's secret!

As Patrick sowed the seeds of the Gospel, he prayed that the word of God which he was given to sow in people's hearts would take root and bring forth new shoots of life that would grow in the wide field which we have the mission to harvest in this age and generation.

What Patrick and others have sowed, we are called to reap.

What we will sow, others will reap in their turn.

Patrick lived His mission as Christ Himself lived His: in communion with the One who sent Him... a communion expressed in and through prayer.

Whatever work that Patrick undertook, he implored, as the Apostle counsels (and St Benedict too in his Rule for Monks), *that the Lord bring it to perfection.*

Again and again, as we read our way through the Gospels we see the importance Jesus gave to prayer as He *went about everywhere doing the good and proclaiming the Good News to all who would hear it.*

There can be little doubt that we need more people to bear witness to Christ and His Gospel in the Irish Church today.

Recruitment to the ordained ministry of priesthood and the various forms of Consecrated Life of men and women are at an all time low. We need to ask the Lord of the harvest to raise up and send labourers into the harvest.

Of course, ministries are not to be confined to ordained ministries and celibate living – as in Consecrated Life. There are many other ways by which people can and should witness to the Gospel in today's world – and, to begin with, right across this land. Lay ministries have developed and are developing, thank God, but here too we need to see fresh blood appear. We need a younger generation of committed and commissioned evangelisers.

Jesus told us *to pray to the Lord of the harvest*, asking Him to act and send new labourers into the harvest.

Are we praying to this end?

Are we praying at all to the extent that we should be?

There is always a danger for even the most committed Christian workers (and perhaps especially the most committed workers) to be so caught up in their work for God that they forget the Lord of the work.

We need to engage with genuine prayer – not just the saying of prayers, but with the prayer of the heart.

There can be – will be – no ministry of compassion (a ministry so ardently longed for and so desperately needed at this time) without men and women (you and me) engaging in prayer of the heart.

True compassion of heart is formed by genuine prayer of the heart.

The formation of compassionate hearts will take place primarily in prayer – prayer which enlarges and widens the heart of the person who prays to the dimensions of God's own heart.

Again and again, it is the Apostle Paul who speaks of how prayer comes into play to give people compassionate hearts. Writing in chapter 10 of his Letter to the Romans, Paul shares his own experience. He writes about how his desire and his prayer to God for the people's salvation go hand in hand. It is clear that for the apostle one leads to the other and that this works in both directions. Paul explains how prayer leads to his desire for the people's welfare and how his longing for their salvation leads him to pray for them all the more.

If prayer is so important to the work of evangelisation this is because it conforms us to the One whom we are called to proclaim to others. It leads us into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and that is a necessary qualification for anyone who has for mission to seek to make Him known.

Until we know Christ we can talk all about Him; we can fill people's heads with ideas about Him, but we will not manage to make Him known – and, as a result, people will not experience what a relationship with Christ should lead to: the transformation of their whole being.

Evangelists should be able to say in all honesty and truth: *We speak to others about what ourselves know.*

Better still, I would say, we should be able to say: *We speak to others about the One whom we ourselves know: the person of Jesus Christ.*

In the Irish Church at this time there is a real need for fresh vigour, more courage and new impetus. We need to be reinvigorated as God's People.

The Church is perceived by many to have grown stale. What it is serving up is seen by many to be past its sell-by date.

If the Church is to have a future in this land, we must be seriously engaged in efforts that will help us arrive at spiritual renewal... and that must stem from prayer. Prayer renewed! Prayer adapted to this time and the place we are at as a society.

Some seem to be suggesting that the way forward is to be hankering after and trying to reproduce what was maybe relevant for a bygone era, but which is not adjusted to the real issues and concerns of the present moment.

We need to be sowing fresh seeds for a new harvest.

What we sow now we may well be sowing in tears, but sow we must, so that others, at some later time, can reap with joy.

There may be times when the work we are engaged can seem to us to be poor and insignificant, of little or no lasting value. We must remember that it is nonetheless necessary – really vital.

Perhaps a word sown here or there will find a heart to welcome it and that heart will prove to be rich and fertile soil that, in its turn, will yield a rich harvest.

The psalmist speaks of those who sow in tears being open to the surprise of reaping in joy.

Those words were written in response to the return of Jewish exiles from captivity; they were composed as God's people lived and came through a particularly hard time. They bear testimony to the fact that the Lord enabled His people to experience recovery after their humiliation: a humiliation that was born of their infidelity, their foolishness and their negligence; their sin and their rebellion against God's ways for them.

The change which took place for Israel – like that for which we long for the Church in this land – did not and never does take place overnight.

Change always takes time – conversion is a process.

The important thing is to trust in the Lord to bring it about in our lives and to be disposed to it happening.

Patrick's story with the people of Ireland was a long one. It engaged the whole of his life. He lived his death on Irish soil – far from his own homeland – to bring about the transformation of the life of this nation.

Patrick recognised that the work in which He was engaged was not his work, but God's work.

As Paul reminded the Corinthians, *it is the Lord who gives the growth!*

In chapter 9 of Matthew's gospel – a text I have already referred to, Jesus makes it clear that everything depends on God in that everything depends upon prayer. In Jesus's vision of things the emergence of evangelists to spread the gospel is itself a fruit from God's grace stemming from prayer. His instruction is clear: *Pray the Lord of the harvest.*

Today's gospel passage taken from chapter 13 of Matthew's Good News story uses the planting image in a way that underlines that the Church's growth really is God's affair: *The kingdom of heaven may be compared with a man who sowed good seed in his field. And again: The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field... the smallest of seeds.*

Men sow, but it is the Lord who gives the growth!

The growth of the kingdom is a humble affair, because it is God's business. Humility is God's hallmark. For this reason humility was also Patrick's hallmark. The following words taken from Patrick's *Confessio* are the words of a man humbly grateful to God for what He, the Lord, had accomplished in and through the ministry of His unworthy servant – a ministry lived in simple obedience of heart to God, out of tender compassion for the people of this land: *I owe an immense debt to God, who granted me so much grace that many people in Ireland were reborn in God through me. Clergy were ordained everywhere to look after these people, who had come to trust in the Lord who called them from the ends of the earth. It was essential that we spread our nets so that a great number be taken for God, and that were plenty of clergy to baptise and counsel people, as the Lord tells us to do in the Gospel. [All of this] was not my grace, but God victorious in me.*

Let me draw this reflection to a close by recalling words Pope Francis spoke when he visited Ireland for the *World Meeting of Families*. I will cite just two little passages from the homily he preached in Phoenix Park.

The first remark I draw attention to is this: *Each Christian is sent forth to be 'a missionary disciple'. The Church as a whole is called to go forth to bring words of eternal life to all peripheries of our world.*

The second remark is the wish the Pope formulated at that Eucharistic celebration on Sunday, 26<sup>th</sup> August, 2018. I believe this wish is equally applicable to our celebration this morning, on this Patrick's day, 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2020: *May our celebration today confirm each one of you, parents and grandparents, children and young people, men and women, religious brothers*

*and sisters, contemplatives and missionaries, deacons, priests and bishops, to share the joy of the Gospel!*

We never celebrate the Eucharist for ourselves alone, but always with the call to share the mystery commemorated here with all our brothers and sisters in humanity. May we do that! May we leave this place convinced that we are called to be *missionary disciples*.

Amen!