

Treasure in broken vessels

It is a sadness, even in Lent, to hear the news about famous and powerful people. Canadian officers of government who seek to inflate their party's influence with "quick wins" and with money pumped into publicity and other forms of deceit. Sports stars who cannot do what they appear to do without falsifying their achievements with synthetic drugs coursing through their bodies.

So it is good to remember St Patrick. This is what he wrote about himself..... "I, Patrick, a sinner, am the most ignorant, and of the least account among the faithful, despised by many....I owe it to God's grace that so many should, through me, be born again to Him." When you wash away the green beer and the shamrocks painted on the faces, it is good to celebrate Patrick.

Patrick's story is so in keeping with the theme of today's readings, and the Bible-based values really shine out of him. Patrick spent most of his adult life quietly, almost in hiding, in France. It wasn't until he was 66 that he set foot back in Ireland. He had good reason not to go there. He had been snatched by raiding pirates from the Irish coast and made into a slave. His father was a civil servant in the Roman style government that guided Britain even after the legions left. He was a deacon in the church, his own father having been a priest. So Patrick grew up in an ordered and faith-filled family and community. The Ireland he was sold into was never ordered, but a war-lord, tribal society and utterly non-Christian. Druids held sway and those with the most weaponry held power. Patrick was used as a herdsman. He was just 16 when the ship-born raiders attacked his village and snatched him. During those 6 long years as a slave he had time to learn to pray. His closeness to God increased in his powerlessness in his world. Prayer in the empty wilds, as he slept and woke with his herds, revealed God in the midst of creation, in the rising sun and the winds and rain, in a fragile flower and the flight of a goose. But above all Patrick learned of God as present with him in Jesus. Patrick digested all that he had heard as a child, but perhaps not thought much about. He grew to understand the justice and the truth of God he saw in Jesus' life and teaching. He learned that beyond truth and justice God had mercy and grace for those who tried and failed. And beyond mercy and grace was the hand of God, strong to save, to rescue and redeem, to bring back home rejoicing to heaven.

It was as part of realising God's power to save when Patrick felt God calling him to escape and run. He did, and made it to a port and asked passage on a ship for France. The captain refused him, and Patrick, helpless and afraid, went off to pray for God's help. He was still praying when one of the crew found him and said there was room on board for him. The boat sailed. Storms tossed the boat and they finally made landfall on the Brittany coast. But warfare had stripped the land bare and the people had fled. The whole crew faced starvation, but Patrick told them to have faith in God, at which point a herd of pigs trotted over the rise towards them. Pork chops saved the day!

Patrick got home, but soon left for France to train as a priest. He really disappeared for years in France among the monasteries and churches. He was eventually made a Bishop and sent to Scotland to the heathen Picts. It was in retirement that he felt God calling him to go back to the place where he had been enslaved. He gathered up his thin courage and deep faith and went there. He wrote of that time, "Daily I expect either a violent death or to be robbed and reduced to slavery....I have cast myself into the hands of the Almighty, for he rules everything." He met constant opposition from the Druids, and finally clashed when he lit the Easter Fire just before a Druid festival when all fires were banned. Quite what happened in the showdown is not recorded, but afterwards Patrick became regarded as a holy man of power. His work of bringing people to know the love of God unfolded as legend and history tell.

All the way through this story what strikes me is how Patrick is not a terribly impressive man, nor does he consider himself one. But what matters is that he considers what he carries to be of inestimable value. He carries knowledge of God's love, forgiveness and grace in Jesus Christ. This is not knowledge like literacy or how to juggle balls. This is knowledge that changes lives and sets people free. This is knowledge that lets people live with one foot in the kingdom of heaven, even when the other one is stuck in an Irish bog! And that is something just too precious to keep to yourself. It is so valuable that you know it is worth the risk of looking stupid, being rejected, or even being enslaved or butchered. If even one person is set free by God's love it is worth the work and the risk.

Paul understood this when he realized that all his credentials as an educated, Pharisee-trained, Roman citizenship-bearing, clean religious record-holding, gold star membership of all the clubs that counted...all of this was just plain junk compared to what he had been given in Christ. And what he had been given was so much more important than himself. He was, like Patrick, a bearer of Good News from God.

Mary of Bethany, the woman at the centre of the Gospel, also knows something about what is worth having and what is not. Somewhere along the way she earned, bought or was given what, in our culture would be a litre bottle of Chanelle #5 perfume (1 ounce of this stuff costs way too much for me to buy, even for Lucy!) Jesus was passing through her house, her hands, her heart on his way to his death. In Jesus she had met with unconditional acceptance, love, grace and joy. In him she had seen the Father! What she held was of incalculable value, and she too realized that everything else, even perfume, was secondary. She gave the only gift she had that was fitting for God. She poured her perfume over his feet and wiped them with her hair, the act of a slave. And yet in that apparent slavery she was free from all else that could control her. She was free in the love of God. Free to give herself away. Free to give herself for the love and faith she carried.

Perhaps it is not just in the church that old values of worth and selfless heroism continue to be honoured. But it is one of our freeing joys that we count the value of people not by the votes they get, or the prizes they win. We try to count the value of a person as we imagine God sees them. Patrick, too scared to go back to Ireland, but who eventually does. Mary, the irresponsible sister, the one who can just give herself in love to Jesus.

God's great saints are mostly people you and I have never heard of. They are the secret cloud of witnesses who knew they were not important, but what they had within them was. They were the ones who tried, in the way they lived, to let the Christ inside them live through them. They were people of prayer, of humility, and of no earthly importance.

I am not sure what God makes of the Provincial Premiers or Federal Cabinet Ministers who care more about winning than about being honest or true. Or what God thinks of those who win the Tour de France and other sports by cheating. Fortunately Jesus told me I will be better off not judging them. I feel mostly ashamed for them. I also don't need to judge the humble and the poor, or those in the comfortable middle. Instead God just asks you and me to know what matters is not so much who we are, but what we carry within us. God asks us to think less of ourselves than of those to whom we may be a blessing. God asks us to share the treasure we have found in Jesus with family, with friends, with enemies and with strangers. To share it by action, by prayer and by words. And then we too might be counted great in the Kingdom of Heaven. Along with the likes of green beer drinking Patrick.