

Last Wednesday parades were held all over Ireland to celebrate St Patrick's Day. It is a day of carnival, of celebration but behind it all, almost hidden by it all is the story of the evangelisation of the Irish people. Much has happened in the years since. The Church has known times of great spiritual growth in which this island has been truly blessed alongside times of great failure and hurt. But at all times there has been this figure of Patrick, himself a complex and very human figure, as a source of inspiration.

One of the views we enjoyed from the Rectory in Ahoghill was that of Slemish. The hill of Slemish, the core of a long dormant volcano, dominated the landscape around Ballymena. Situated just outside the village of Broughshane, it is reputed to be the spot where Patrick, who as a young man was captured from his home and family in Britain, served as a slave tending sheep. In the 'Confessions', reputed to be written by Patrick towards the end of his life, the saint speaks of that time in terms of a growing spiritual awakening, seeing it in terms of God disciplining him. After some six years of captivity, Patrick escaped and returned to England and to his family. He is trained for ministry, probably in France, though he always regards himself as having little learning.

In the course of his 'Confessions' he speaks of a sense of call to return to Ireland. He faced severe opposition from some within the Church who brought up his lack of learning and somewhat dubious lifestyle before his conversion. None the less he returns. His ministry is marked by times of success. He speaks with obvious pride in the numbers he brought to Baptism. There were the darker times, times of repeated brushes with death and imprisonment as well as an inner struggle to remain true to the Christ who had called him.

I am left with a picture of a very human figure, aware of his failings yet feeling compelled to fulfil the ministry to which he had been called, aware that it is only by grace that he can fulfil it. There is an expression that occurs near the beginning of the 'Confessions' that has stood out for me and one that seemed to set the tone of the rest of the book. He

described his own vocation, and that of any believer, to be ‘a letter of Christ bearing salvation to the uttermost parts of the world.’ *Patrick in his own words – J Duffy – p 14*). You and I each called to be a letter of Christ; called to proclaim Christ, to witness to Christ, to be Christ.

Next Sunday young people from this Parish and the Parish of Raheny will be confirmed by the Archbishop. At the heart of this Service they will make for themselves the promises of Baptism. We as a congregation will be witnesses, encouragers. It is not just a matter of being witnesses and encouragers next Sunday; we are called to stand alongside them in love and prayer and support in the days that will lie ahead.

These young people are about to enter their teenage years. These are strange, exciting, troubling, confusing, exhilarating, frustrating times for teenagers – and of course for their parents. It is an age of questioning, doubting, rebelling – a time of idealism, of selfishness, or generosity – a time of yearning to belong and be accepted and yet to be free of ties; a time of forming new, different relationships, a time when sexuality begins to kick in and with that the turmoil of emotions. A time of transition between childhood and adulthood, all the time buffeted by the many competing claims for their attention in this complicated, increasing secular and material world.

Next Sunday they will make for themselves the promises of Confirmation and come forward to receive Holy Communion. In one sense they are not ready but then were any of us truly ready in heart and mind for that step. I suspect I am not alone in saying that my understanding of Baptism, of discipleship, of the Eucharist has developed and matured over the years. So they are being invited to join us on a life long journey of faith and discipleship. They are, if you like, being invited to become in themselves, ‘letters from Christ’ But who is to be a ‘letter from Christ’ to them?

In the portion we read from the letter of Paul to the Philippians we read:

¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

How are they to know, how are they to encounter Christ? For that matter how are any of us to know and encounter Christ? We encounter Christ in one another as we allow Christ to live, to speak, to serve, to love in and through us. Young people drift away, drift away from family, from Church – in part that drift is a part and parcel of that whole process of questioning, doubting, rebelling that I was referring to earlier, that is so much part of that journey from childhood to adulthood. Parents have watched, sometimes helplessly, as children have gone off, made mistakes in education, in relationships and a host of other areas that they know they will regret in times to come. But they continue to love and watch over their children. God will continue to love and watch over each one of us, over each one of our children even though at times we might wonder away. Next Sunday we will watch as witnesses, as encouragers. As I said, it is not just a matter of being witnesses and encouragers next Sunday; we are called to stand alongside them in love and prayer and support in the days that will lie ahead as living signs of the love and concern of God for each one of them; to be a community that is open and welcoming; to be a community within which they can feel at home, within which they can continue their own spiritual pilgrimage, within which they can encounter Christ.

The early Celtic Church had a very strong sense of God, of Christ very much present in our midst, in the world around us and in one another. In the Breat Plate, an early Irish hymn attributed to St Patrick (no 322 in our book) we have a lovely expression of Christ accompanying, enfolding us, living within us as we travel the road:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Patrick spoke of himself, of all believers, as a 'letter of Christ'. This is the Christ we are to take out into the world; this is the Christ who goes with us as we go out into the world. The Christ who emptied himself, who drew alongside the rejected, the despised, who turned the other cheek, who went the extra mile. This is the Christ we are encouraging our young people to follow, to show to the world at large. How can they follow, how can they show unless they have first met that Christ in us? And see in us a community that is shaped by the self giving, self emptying love of God in Christ, a community that is 'a letter of Christ' to the world, to one another, to them ,