

St. Patrick biography

Yesterday was St Patrick's Day. St Patrick's Day is commonly known as the day when the Irish, and anyone who feels like claiming to have Irish ancestry, wear green and drink a lot of whiskey and Guinness.

However, St Patrick, the patron Saint of Ireland, was actually quite an amazing person with an amazing story that is worth me retelling to you this morning.

EARLY LIFE

St. Patrick was born in England about AD 385. His father, was a deacon from a Roman family of high social standing. His mother was a close relative of St. Martin of Tours – whom our chapel is named after. Surprisingly, St. Patrick himself was not raised with a strong emphasis on religion. Education was not particularly stressed during his childhood either. Later in life, this would become a source of embarrassment for St. Patrick, who would write in his *Confessions*, "I blush and fear exceedingly to reveal my lack of education."

□□ When St. Patrick was 16 years old he was captured by Irish pirates. They brought him to Ireland where he was sold into slavery. There, his job was to tend pigs and sheep. Saint Patrick's master was a high priest of Druidism, a Pagan sect that ruled religious influence over Ireland at the time. □□ St. Patrick came to view his enslavement as God's test of his faith. In the midst of the squalor of pig filth, God began to transform Patrick's heart. In his *Confessions* he wrote, "I was sixteen and knew not the true God, but in a strange land the Lord opened my unbelieving eyes, and I was converted." Patrick became convinced that the kidnapping and homesickness were actually opportunities to know Christ better. "Anything that happens to me," he wrote, "whether pleasant or distasteful, I ought to accept with [serenity] giving thanks to God ... who never disappoints." During his six years of captivity, he became deeply devoted to Christianity through constant prayer.

For the rest of his life, Patrick would remain captivated by the grace of God. He wrote:

And I am certain of this: I was a dumb stone lying squashed in the mud; the Mighty and

Merciful God came, dug me out and set me on top of the wall. Therefore, I praise him and ought to render him something for his wonderful benefits to me both.

MISSIONARY WORK

Around 408, after six years of slavery, the idea of escaping came to St. Patrick in a dream. In the dream, a voice promised him he would find his way home to England. Eager to see this happen, St. Patrick escaped to the coast and convinced some sailors to let him board their ship. After three days of sailing, he and the crew abandoned the ship in France and wandered, lost, for 28 days—covering 200 miles of territory in the process. At last, St. Patrick was reunited with his family in England.

In his own mind Patrick was done with Ireland for good. According to Patrick, "It is not in my nature to show divine mercy toward the very ones who once enslaved me." □ □

But, God would change Patrick's heart. Partially through a dramatic dream, Patrick knew that God had called him to return to Ireland—not as a slave, but as a messenger of the gospel. His family and friends were understandably horrified by his decision. "Many friends tried to stop my mission," Patrick wrote. "They said, 'Why does this fellow waste himself among dangerous enemies who don't even know God?'"

Despite these objections, in A.D. 432 Patrick used his own money to purchase a boat and sail back to Ireland. He spent the rest of his life preaching the gospel in Ireland, watching many people come to Christ. He also passionately defended the human rights of slaves.

Upon his arrival in Ireland, St. Patrick was initially met with hostile resistance. But St. Patrick quickly managed to spread Christian teachings far and wide. Through preaching, writing and performing countless baptisms, he convinced Pagan Druids that they were worshiping idols under a belief system that kept them enslaved. By accepting Christianity, he told them, they would be elevated to "the people of the Lord and the sons of God."

Patrick was street-smart. He understood the Irish clan system, he knew that if the chieftains of the various clans became Christian, the rest of the clans would also. Spreading the word of God involved politics and diplomacy. Patrick used every means possible to spread the word of God. The shamrock was the sacred plant of the Druids and legend says Patrick used it to teach about the Trinity. He baptized people in wells, and many holy wells

in Ireland today are called after him.

He worked night and day to bring the faith all over Ireland. He preached with authority and acted with miracles. He was what we would now describe as a charismatic person. He didn't just come quietly into a town. When he came he and the faith were noticed.

We read in Patrick's own writings that he would have loved to return to his parents and his companions in France but he made the sacrifice of not returning for the sake of spreading the faith in Ireland. He wrote: "I am bound by the Spirit who gives evidence against me if I do this, telling me that I shall be guilty and I fear to waste the labor that I began, not I, but Christ the Lord, who commanded me to come to be with them for the rest of my life."

What kept Patrick going during his trials was obviously his close friendship with God. He drew the strength for living from God. He was humble, there was no pride in him, he realized that it was God who was working through him. At the very end of his *Confessions* he admits that he did nothing, it was God who did it all. He wrote:

"But I want you to know and sincerely believe that anything I achieved was not through my effort, it was the gift of God and this is my confession before I die."

He is said to have died on March 17th 493 and is buried in Downpatrick in County Down.

Not many of us will experience the kind of trials that Patrick experienced in his life – being enslaved for six years, from sixteen until twenty-four. Those who do go through lesser trials than this normally take a long time to get over them and then struggle to forgive those who have done them wrong. But how many people can be so forgiving, so loving, and have their hearts so changed that they could want to dedicate their lives to serving those who had hurt them. Through knowing God and his forgiving love, St. Patrick turned the thing in his life that had caused him pain into a source of joy and into his strength, loving, serving and transforming the Irish nation through his love, and writing his name forever into the history books in the process.

The challenges we face in our lives can either make bitter or better. Through following Jesus they made St Patrick better. How will you respond to the challenges that face you?

Let me finish by praying for us the shortened version of His famous Prayer, known as *St Patrick's Breastplate*.

Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
 Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
 Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.
I arise today
Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through belief in the Threeness,
Through confession of the Oneness of the Creator of creation.
Amen.