

LENT FIVE, YEAR B, MARCH 17, 2024

It's St. Patrick's Day – a day that is synonymous with parades, lots of drinking, food, lots of drinking, fun, lots of drinking, wearing of the green and did I mention lots of drinking. Well, all kidding aside, did you know that while the day has become a celebration of all things Irish, the original feast was not about parades but pioneering the church among unreached people.

The figure who is celebrated today, Patrick, is also shrouded in myths and mystical magical stories. So, who really was St. Patrick?

Patrick was born in the late fourth century around 385 in what is now northeast England. He was born among the Celtic "Britons," to a Romanized family of Christians. His father was a deacon, and his grandfather a priest. But his parents' faith didn't find a place in his heart early on. In his youth, according to one of his biographers, George Hunter, "he lived toward the wild side."

When Patrick was 16, he was kidnapped by Irish raiders and taken back to Ireland, where he served as a slave for six years under a tribal chief, who was also a druid. While a slave in Ireland, he began to appreciate the gospel of his childhood. But as a captive he also came to understand the Irish Celtic people, and their language and culture, with a kind of intuitive perceptiveness. When he eventually escaped from slavery, he was a changed man and recognized he was now a Christian in his heart. He studied for the ministry and led a parish in Britain for nearly 20 years.

At age 48, which was considered past a man's life expectancy in the fifth century, Patrick had a dream. In his dream he heard an Irish accent pleading, "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us." Since he knew the language and the customs from his captivity, and long having strategized about how the gospel might come to the Irish, he now answered the call to return to the place of his pain with a message of joy. The slave returned to his captors with good news of true freedom.

But this would be no ordinary mission. The Irish Celts were considered "barbarians," as the Romans were prone to consider anyone not Roman. The Irish may have had a few Christians among them, but there was no thriving church or gospel movement.

Patrick decided to take a different and controversial approach to the prevailing missionary efforts of the early church. Instead of Romanizing the people and seeking to "civilize" them with respect to Roman customs, he wanted to see the gospel penetrate deeply into the Irish culture and produce an indigenous movement. He didn't want to colonize the Irish, but to truly evangelize them.

How Patrick evangelized the Irish was truly remarkable. As the author of Celtic Christianity writes, "The fact that Patrick understood the people and their language, their issues, and their ways, serves as the most strategically significant single insight that was to drive the wider expansion of Celtic Christianity, and stands as perhaps our greatest single learning from this movement. There is no shortcut to understanding the people. When you understand the people, you will often know what to say and do, and how. When the people know that the Christians understand them, they infer that maybe the High God understands them too."

Patrick knew the Irish well enough to engage them where they were and build authentic bridges into their society and culture. He wanted to see the gospel grow in Irish soil, rather than, symbolically, pave it over with a Roman road.

Hunter further writes, “Their belief that Ultimate Reality is complex, and their fascination with rhetorical triads and the number three opened them to Christianity’s Triune God. Christianity’s contrasting features of idealism and practicality engaged identical traits in the Irish character. No other religion could have engaged the Irish people’s love for heroism, stories, and legends like Christianity. Some of Christianity’s values and virtues essentially matched, or fulfilled, ideals in Irish piety and folklore. Irish Christianity was able to deeply affirm, and fulfill, the Irish love for nature and their belief in the closeness of the divine.”

A notable part of his strategy was that Patrick didn’t go solo to Ireland. He went with a team. Patrick assembled a close-knit crew that would tackle the work together, in the same location, laboring for the founding of a church, before moving on together to the next tribe. It was, what Hunter calls, a “group approach to apostolic ministry.”

We don’t have records of the details of Patrick’s ministry teams and strategies, but Hunter says, “from a handful of ancient sources, we can piece together an outline of a typical approach, which undoubtedly varied from one time and setting to another.”

Patrick’s teams would have about a dozen members. They would approach a tribe’s leadership and seek conversion, or at least their clearance, and set up camp nearby. The team “would meet the people, engage them in conversation and in ministry, and look for people who appeared receptive” In due course, “One band member or another would probably join with each responsive person to reach out to relatives and friends”. They would minister weeks and months among them, eventually pursuing baptisms and the founding of a church. They would leave behind a team member or two to provide leadership for the fledgling church and move, with a convert or two, to the next tribe.

With such an approach, “The church that emerged within the tribe would have been astonishingly indigenous. While Patrick’s pioneering approach is often celebrated today — and perhaps a model in some respects of the kind of mission well-suited for an increasingly post-Christian society 1500 years later — most of his contemporaries weren’t impressed. “The British leaders were offended and angered that Patrick was spending priority time with ‘pagans,’ ‘sinners,’ and ‘barbarians’.

But Patrick knew such an approach had good precedent. Instead of acquiescing to the religious establishment, he took the gospel to the unreached Irish. And instead of coasting to a cushy retirement, he gave 28 years to the nation-changing evangelization of Ireland. Unfortunately, Patrick’s approach was never adopted as a way to evangelize people which is basically from the inside out and not top down with threats, intimidation and death. Christian history is filled with wars and the exploitation and subjugation of indigenous people for the sake of “the gospel”. How wrong we’ve been in not adopting St. Patrick’s evangelizing methods.

According to tradition, Patrick died March 17 — many think the year was 461, but we don’t know for certain. To dispel some myths, Patrick did not drive the snakes out of Ireland nor do he explain the trinity using a shamrock. Also, the color originally associated with Patrick was blue as it was featured on the Irish flag and it wasn’t until the Irish rebellion of 1798, that green became officially associated with the day. Since

the British wore red the Irish sang "The wearing of the green" which cemented the color's relevance in Irish history.

More importantly, what Patrick did do was to choose to incorporate Celtic traditional rituals into his lessons of Christianity instead of attempting to eradicate native Irish beliefs. For instance, he used bonfires to celebrate Easter since the Irish were used to honoring their gods with fire. The Easter vigil begins with the lighting of new fire, He also superimposed a sun, a powerful Irish symbol, onto the Christian cross to create what is now called a Celtic cross, so that veneration of the symbol would seem more natural to the Irish. The various Celtic knots also took on Christian meanings. Patrick's gift was being able to relate to the people but also not to denigrate what they held precious and important to them. He used the rich symbolism of their Celtic heritage and applied it to Christianity. Patrick could relate to the people and thus his love for the Irish and their heritage grew his popularity and legends and myths abounded about him.

The story of Patrick echoes the gospel today when the people asked we want to see Jesus. Patrick let the Irish people see Jesus the way we should always show Jesus. The mission of God's church, is to present God's love in Jesus so others will find love, hope, strength, and compassion. The church is to be one of invitation not judgment, of openness not condemnation, of inquiry not pat answers. This is what Patrick understood with every fiber of his being. His love for the Gospel and understanding the Irish people enabled him to show how God's extravagant love prevails. We are called to be and do the same. So let us be a church that follows Jesus who meets people where they are so you can bring God's love and grace to them unconditionally. Amen.