

Donnybrook
17 March 2022

Welcome

Welcome again everybody to our celebration of St Patrick. Given the longer weekend, there is time to pause, time to rest and time to reflect. We step out of the pressures of the present and take the long view of faith. I'm still impressed by *The Best Catholics in the World* by Derek Scally because he goes to the trouble of taking the long view, locating the recent tragic past in the light of sixteen centuries of development.

Topic

The feast also invites us to reflect on where too from here. St Patrick can be an inspiration here because some of his writings have come down to us in the *Confessions* and the *Letter to Coroticus*.

Steps

When I was in secondary school, we had to translate the opening lines of St Patrick's Confessions: *ego Patricius, peccator rusticissimus* / I am Patrick, a sinner, most unlearned. He comes across as a distinct, engaging personality with his own voice and energy. Here are the opening paragraph in English.

I am Patrick, a sinner, most unlearned, the least of all the faithful, and utterly despised by many. My father was Calpornius, a deacon, son of Potitus, a priest, of the village Bannavem Taburniæ; he had a country seat nearby, and there I was taken captive. I was then about sixteen years of age. I did not know the true God. I was taken into captivity to Ireland with many thousands of people.

His story is mirrored in today's readings. Like him, Amos was an unwilling prophet. Like him, Paul was a totally committed pastor, who would do anything for the people in his care. Like the Gospel of Luke, Patrick is steeped in the Bible. The Confessions are dense with citations and allusions – an apostle on fire with the word.

The intense commitment of St Patrick made me think spontaneously of St Paul. The first letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest Christian document to come down to us (the earliest copy is in the CBL). Although this is his first letter, he wrote as someone with a long experience of faith and of preaching. At that stage in his life, Paul had spend 40 years as a devout Jew and other 15 as a believer in Christ and as an evangeliser or missionary. The last paragraph of today's reading portrays the pastor very movingly:

Instead, we were unassuming. Like a nursing mother feeding and looking after her own children, we felt so devoted and protective

towards you, and had come to love you so much, that we were eager to hand over to you not only the Good News but our whole lives as well.

It is a great blessing to have leaders and pastors have, in a way, become what they proclaim.

To come to the present. There are three salient features marking where we find ourselves in 2022. Broadly, the handing on of the faith has not worked for some decades. We can lament this but it is just a fact. Secondly, the number of ordained pastors is fast diminishing, not to say disappearing. A crisis is also an opportunity. In Donnybrook, in the diocese, nationally and universally, we have embarked on a whole new way of being church: the Synodal Pathway.

It is time to gather, to listen, to dream. What seems clear is that the future of the community of faith will depend on pastors, like Paul and Patrick, and members like Paul and Patrick who are on fire with the faith, as Patrick and Paul were. As they became what they proclaimed, we too are called to be living witnesses of the Gospel. We are called to engage again with the Good News. We are called to dream: how should the community of faith, the church be, so that it / we can more closely be of service to the gospel.

Conclusion

Perhaps in the past, the feast would have been a moment of celebration and congratulation. Today is different. Different because culture has changed. Different because a whole new way of being church is suddenly possible.