**HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF ST PATRICK**

**ST PATRICK'S CHURCH, LEICESTER, 17 MARCH, 2022**

During Lent we focus as a diocese on Christian Discipleship. A disciple is someone who wishes not only to grow in their relationship with Christ, to know that they are personally loved by Christ, but who also wishes to be used by Christ as a co-worker, as a means by which he or she may bring to others something of Christ's love, compassion and practical care. A disciple is someone who is humble and very aware that they themselves often fall short of what Christ wants for them, and who acknowledges their need of forgiveness and of growth in faith. In the life and example of St Patrick we find someone who has much to teach us about what is to be a disciple of Christ.

So, who is St Patrick? He was born towards the end of the 4th century to wealthy upper class parents living perhaps on the west coast of Roman Britain. He tells us that his home was not a place of great Christian piety and prayer. As a boy of 15, perhaps a little spoiled and certainly used to being waited upon by servants, he was captured by Irish pirates and sold into slavery. For six years he worked on a farm, perhaps somewhere on the west coast of Ireland, though I know where he worked is greatly disputed many counties claim him! Patrick managed to make his escape back to Britain, felt called there by God to become a priest and to return to Ireland - this time to work freely as a missionary bishop. It was there that he spent the rest of his life bringing the message of Christ to the people of Ireland who then as you know, in many ways over the ages, have brought it to many other parts of the world. So much so, that St Patrick is also patron saint of Nigeria.

So what can St Patrick teach us about being a disciple of Christ today? I said earlier that a disciple is someone who has come to believe that they are loved by Christ and called to love and serve him. Early in his life Patrick had experienced the trauma of being captured, taken away from everything that was familiar to him, his family, home, and friends, and sold into slavery to work in a foreign land. There in his complete sense of aloneness and helplessness he turned to God, and God did not fail him. These are Patrick's own words from the 'Confession', an account he wrote near the end of his life to thank God for all that he had done for him: "I am Patrick, a sinner, most unlearned, the least of all the faithful, and utterly despised by many...the Lord opened the sense of my unbelief that I might at last remember my sins and be converted with all my heart to the Lord my God who watched over me...and guarded and comforted me as would a Father his son. Hence I cannot be silent about the great benefits and the great grace which the Lord has deigned to bestow upon me in the land of my captivity."

Where did this deep personal trust in, and relationship with, Christ come from? Well it wasn't from time spent in church, but rather, as he tells us, from time spent up on the hills where he was put to work looking after the sheep: "But after I came to Ireland - every day I had to tend sheep, and many times a day I prayed; the love of God and respect for him came to me more and more, and my faith was strengthened. And my spirit was moved so that in a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and almost as many in the night...and I used to get up for prayer before daylight, through snow, frost, rain, and I felt no harm." This experience of a personal relationship with Christ, of finding God's help and nearness to him, when no human help was available, profoundly affected the whole of St Patrick's life. It gave him an unshakeable personal relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Although, in those early days he was seen by his captors as just a slave, Patrick came to see that, in the eyes of God the Father who loved him, he had supreme value and worth; that Christ Jesus walked closely with him each day, and that he was supported by the Holy Spirit, who prayed in him, guided and inspired him.

A disciple is also someone who wishes to be a co-worker with Christ, someone through whom Christ can reach out to others with his love, care and compassion. Patrick's developing prayer life, learned in the hardship of his slavery in Ireland was, after his escape, to be the source of his courage and his zeal to return to Ireland so that he could share with the people there his personal faith in Christ. Patrick tells us in his writings something of his life as a bishop there. In spite of meeting some opposition and jealousy, he converted, baptised and brought many thousands of people to Christ; he ordained many clergy, and also encouraged a form of monastic life. He travelled widely throughout Ireland and claims that he was able to bring the Good News of Christ to many remote parts of the country where the gospel had not been preached before. This is how Patrick himself humbly acknowledges that all of this was very much God's work in him: "I am very much God's debtor, who gave me such grace that many people were reborn in God through me and afterwards confirmed, and that clerics were ordained for them everywhere... God ...chose me for this office - to be, although among his least, one of his ministers. Hence let me render thanks unto him for all that he has done for me."

One of the ways in which we can each honour St Patrick today, other than with a pint of Guinness or another tipple of your choice, is to try to be, like him, a disciple of Christ, a co-worker with Christ. How? Well here in Leicester one simple way everyone can put their faith into action is by being welcoming to others, especially to immigrants. Many of us here today are immigrants, or the children of immigrants, who have worked hard and made our homes here. We don't easily forget how difficult it can be to leave one's country and settle in another. Those of you, as Irish people coming to here to Leicester,

will well remember how nervous and unsure you first felt all those years ago, and how a helping hand or a friendly word meant so much to you; the same is true of all peoples who have travelled here. Leicester has over the years become a multi-cultural, multi faith city, with a good reputation for working hard to ensure that people of all cultures, faiths and none, can live together here in peace and with respect for each other. There will surely soon be some of the suffering people of Ukraine coming here as refugees from the destruction of their homes and livelihoods; they too will need a warm welcome as well as practical help and support. May our celebration of this Mass of St Patrick Feast be a time when we open our hearts afresh to encounter Christ in prayer, when we ask the Lord today to help us hear and respond to what He may be asking of us as his disciples; how he may be inviting each of to play a part, big or small, in reaching out with welcome and practical care to the newcomers in our midst. To Fr Raphael and the parishioners of St Patrick's, thank you for hosting this Mass and welcoming us all here today. May St Patrick continue to inspire you to become a warm, welcoming and missionary parish here in Leicester; and may the self-giving life of St Patrick continue to inspire all of us to lead good and generous lives in the service of others. St Patrick, pray for us.