

SAINT PATRICK - MISSIONARY TO IRELAND

BACKGROUND:

We have difficulty placing Patrick in history. Even our dictionaries and encyclopedias can't agree when he was born, or when he ministered. What little information we have about St. Patrick indicates he served as a missionary to Ireland in c. A.D. 400. Patrick was apparently an Englishman who was kidnapped and taken to Ireland as a slave.

He was later ordained by an early church Bishop on the continent of Europe (either in France or in England). All of this taking place before the Catholic Church became a formidable international body. Recall Constantine, the father of Catholicism, was converted in approximately A.D. 325. Because of Patrick's previous lifestyle his ordination was contested and required a great deal of penance. Most conclude his trip across Ireland and voyage across the channel were rife with various sins--many involving crimes of moral turpitude.

Much of the information contained herein comes from a very brief autobiography obtained from a book written by Thomas Cahill entitled *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.

The life of a shepherd-slave could not have been a happy one. The young boy had been taken from his family and shipped across the channel to a strange land. Patrick was without family to take care of him. He learned early-on how to take care of himself. His only protection came from his master. His master was a man who did not hold his own life highly, let alone anyone else's. The work of a shepherd was bitterly isolated. Months at a time he spent alone in the hills. Deprived of intercourse with other humans, he must have taken a long time to master the language and customs of the Irish. The approach of strangers may have held special terror.

Like many others in such impossible circumstances Patrick developed a close relationship with God and a very active prayer life. "Tending flocks was my daily work and when evening came I would spend hours praying and asking God for guidance and direction. The love of God and the fear of Him surrounded me more and more--my faith grew and the spirit in me was aroused."

Patrick endured six years of this woeful isolation. On his last night as a slave he received a revelation from God. A mysterious voice said to him, "Your hungers are rewarded, you are going home." Patrick's master's farm was located inland, nowhere near the Sea. But Patrick set out, "Whither I knew not."

He walked some 200 miles through unknown territory. Miraculously Patrick was never stopped or followed. The young boy must have lived off the land traveling many miles until he reached the Southeaster Inlet where he saw a ship being loaded. The sailors were loading a cargo of Irish Hounds to be sold in Europe. Hounds were highly prized as hunting dogs.

Patrick approached the captain who eyed him suspiciously. He showed the captain that he had the money for His passage (where he got it, we'll never know for sure though most agree he stole money from various folks while traveling across Ireland).

The captain told him curtly, "You are wasting your time asking to sail with us." This was Patrick's greatest moment of danger. Recognized as a fugitive in a seaside settlement he could not expect to remain a free-man ... "I began to pray and before I finished my prayer one of the sailors shouted "Come quickly they are calling you, Come on board we will take you on trust."

It took three days to cross to the continent and as they left their ship and journeyed inland they found only devastation. This may well have been the year 407—the year that hundreds of thousands of hungry Germans had crossed the icy Rhine wreaking devastation through much of Gaul. The little party of exporters may have arrived in the wake of the German war parties. At any rate they discovered neither a single human nor a meal.

The captain taunted Patrick "How about it Christian? You say your God is great and all powerful, so why can't you pray for us? We are starving to death." ... Patrick responded "From the bottom of your heart turn trusting to the Lord my God ... For with Him nothing is impossible ..." Suddenly the sound of a stampede attracted the attention of captain and crew and as they raised their eyes a herd of pigs were seen coming down the road in their direction. Not just food but the best food of all.

It took Patrick a few more years, but he at last made it home to England where he was welcomed as a son by his parent. They begged him not to leave them again. But Patrick was no longer a care-free teenager. He was hardened physically and psychologically by un-shareable experiences and hopelessly behind his peers in education. He had no desire to settle down. Try though he might he could not get the Irish out of his mind ... When he could no longer resist ... he left his family and followed the leadership of God to an island monastery located at present day Cannes, where he petitioned for a theological education in preparation for an ordination as a missionary ... At last with great difficulty he is ordained and became what was perhaps, the first missionary bishop. Patrick the escaped slave became Saint Patrick, Apostle to the Irish nation. His love for his adopted people shined through his writings and it was not just a generalized Christian benevolence but a love for individuals as they were. He worried constantly for the Irish, not just for their spiritual needs, but also for their physical welfare ...

In his last years he could look out over an Ireland transformed by his teaching. According to tradition he established bishops throughout the country--the former slave had succeeded beyond measure.

Today, Saint Patrick's Day is celebrated throughout the Christian world.