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ST. PATRICK: FROM SLAVE TO SERVANT

by Sara Tusek

It may not seem like a long journey from slave to servant, but in the case of St. Patrick it took a lifetime. Though born a free man, he was made a slave; he became free again and then chose to become a servant of God and man.

WHO WAS ST. PATRICK?

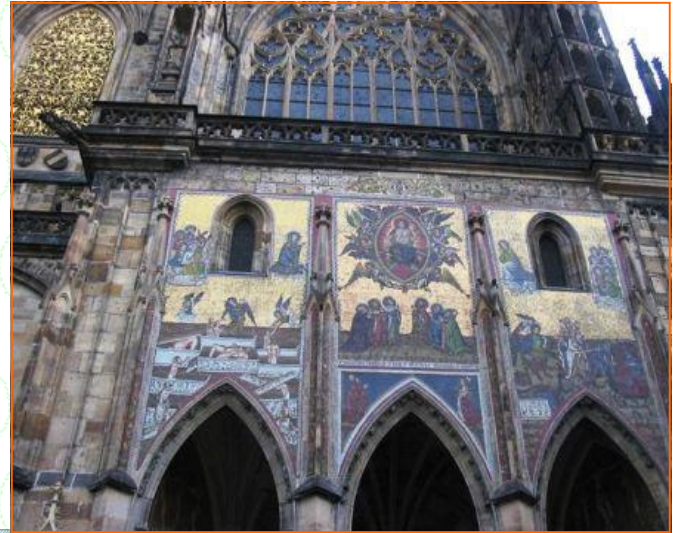
The historical record about Patrick is sketchy; most likely he was born sometime around AD 389, in Roman Britain, perhaps in present-day Wales. He was the son of a Christian deacon and grandson of a priest, in an era when priests were free to marry. He was captured at age 16 by raiders and carried to Ireland, where he was a slave, working as a shepherd for six years.

During the isolated years as a shepherd, Patrick apparently became very firm in his Christian faith. He managed to escape slavery and went to France. For most escapees, the idea of voluntarily returning to the place of their former enslavement would be laughable, but here the story gets interesting. Patrick was given a dream in which, he believed, God told him to return to Ireland and spread the Gospel to the heathen Irish. Patrick said “yes.”

“Patrick surely knew that being a servant brings with it great joy and satisfaction.”

RETURN TO IRELAND

In AD 432 Patrick landed again on Irish soil, this time to bring to the Irish a unique form of Christianity now referred to as “Celtic Christianity.” Taking into account that all of European Christendom at this time followed the Church of Rome, this version of Christianity was different. Viewing Patrick as a model missionary, you could say that he was one of the first to practice the kind of “alongside” mission



Church Façade with Murals, Courtesy Luis Blanco

work that today is considered most effective—he lived “alongside” his newly-converted friends, building a Christian church that was independent of the Church of Rome, with its authoritarian structure, in which God could speak directly to people with no intermediary.

CELTIC CHRISTIANITY

In many ways, the Celtic church is a model for today’s ecumenically-minded churches, which do not rely on any one church tradition or structure, but instead depend on a fresh indwelling of the Holy Spirit to shape the organizational forms best suited to the local group of believers.

One of Patrick’s strengths was his ability to take people “where they were” and bring them to Christ. At that time the pagan religion of the Druids was influential in Ireland. By approaching the Druid chieftains with respect, rather than condemnation, Patrick was able to model a Christianity that was attractive to the chieftains; several of them converted to his new religion, greatly aiding his missionary activities. *To p. 2*

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CELTIC CHRISTIANITY *From p. 1*

You could say that Patrick took into account the long-held beliefs and customs of the Irish (which he knew intimately from his six years of living as a slave in Ireland) and presented the Gospel in a way that these people could understand, without judging them. Rather than criticizing their culture and offending the people, he offered to add to their lives something good—a loving God Who cares about their lives and wants to know them.

“LIVING ALONGSIDE”

Patrick devoted his life to the building of the Christian church, focusing on the Irish. His list of accomplishments is impressive:

- He must have been a kind and helpful man, a builder of consensus, as he is credited with an astonishing array of accomplishments in the Celtic church.
- He is said (probably hyperbolically) to have driven all the snakes and frogs out of Ireland; he healed the blind and raised nine persons from death.
- He was said to have converted all the Irish chieftains and bards (itinerant story-tellers), founding 700 churches and ordaining 3000 priests (these figures might also be inaccurate).

THE IRISH CELTIC CHURCH EXCELS

Although some of Patrick's accomplishments may be more legend than truth, it is certainly true that he helped establish a Celtic Christian church in Ireland that excelled in Christian piety, and serves as

one example of the monastic tradition. At home the Irish established monasteries, not to withdraw from society, but to serve as educational and social centers for the surrounding countryside. The monasteries became centers of civilization in a rural society.

The monasteries also functioned as seminaries, equipping the Irish missionaries that traveled across the sea to Europe, taking the Gospel to the pagan peoples in modern Germany, Czech Republic, France and England. These missionaries organized in groups of twelve, traveling and proselytizing for Christ, spreading the good news as far as they could go.

SLAVE TO SERVANT

Patrick's life is remarkably full of excitement and resolve. Taken from freedom as a teenager, forced into a solitary and rugged life as a shepherd, finding freedom and then giving it up—Patrick surely knew that being a servant brings with it great joy and satisfaction. He became a servant of the Irish people, those who had enslaved him, so that they could know the love and peace of Christ.

In his service to God and man, Patrick not only found personal fulfillment but also brought people from many nations to Christ: not just the Irish, but also German, Czech, and French Christian organizations and orders owe their existence to Patrick's missionary work. Patrick was obedient to his dream in which God told him to give up his freedom and become a servant. He was a true servant leader.

To learn more about the significance of St. Patrick and his ministry to Ireland, I recommend [The Early Celtic Church: St. Patrick, St. Brendan and You](#) by Dr. Bill Higgins (1951, Grey Pilgrim Publications, Lookout Mountain, GA), from which some of this information is taken.

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