

[send this](#)[bookmark](#)[print](#)[close](#)

The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.41 No.16

The fourth Sunday in Lent (Refreshment or
Mothering Sunday)

03/14/10

SAINT PATRICK

We know little about Saint Patrick; and what little we do know has been overlaid by a luxuriant growth of – often very appealing – early medieval legend, and – a not very appealing – 19th century cult of sentimental Irishness or (heaven help us) early 21st century “Celtic spirituality” – a vaguely Christian amalgam of new-age and eco-feminist, notions laced with twee folk music. We know little about Patrick but what we know is certain, for we have two tantalizingly short documents from his hand. What they tell us, is that sometime in the 5th century, after the collapse of Roman rule in Britain, a youth named Patricius, not yet sixteen years old, of Romanized Christian British family, was kidnapped by Irish raiders and enslaved. Prompted by a vision, he eventually escaped and returned to his parents in Britain, but within a short time, once again prompted by a vision, he returned to Ireland as a missionary Bishop to the pagan Irish.

This ministry cannot have been easy. Patrick's Letter to Coroticus rebukes in stinging terms a Christian (!) British chieftain who had raided Ireland, and massacred or kidnapped a large number of young men and women whom Patrick had just baptized and confirmed. Heart-break also came in attacks on his character from within the Church, which he sought to answer in his Confession. Nevertheless, despite what were clearly daunting trials and disappointments, his evangelizing mission was extraordinarily successful. Within generations after Patrick's death, Irish monks were evangelizing the pagan Anglo-Saxon tribes who had conquered and settled Patrick's homeland in the 6th century: thus Anglicans may rightly claim Patrick as their own father in faith.

Patrick's spiritual transformation is set out in a fascinating passage of his Confession. “After I came to Ireland [as a slave], it was then that I was made to shepherd the flocks day after day, and, as I did so, I would pray all the time, right through the day. More and more the love of God and fear of him grew strong within me, and as my faith grew, so the Spirit became more active, so that in a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and at night only slightly less. Although I might be staying in a forest or out on a mountainside, it would be the same; even before dawn broke, I would be aroused to pray; in snow, in frost, in rain, I would hardly notice any discomfort, and I was never slack but always full of energy. It is clear to me now, that this was due

to the fervour of the Spirit within me." In the misery of slavery, exile and physical deprivation he turned to the Lord, as the sole, inalienable treasure of the spirit. Thus was born the heroic austerity and evangelical fervor which was to characterize Irish, Scottish, and indeed English Christianity in those early centuries, and to which we owe so much.

Thus it is in the observance of Lenten discipline, rather than in the civic festival that bears Patrick's name, in which we find the authentic spirit of Patrick. May his example be our guide us to find in the Lord the sole treasure of the spirit. GGD

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

send this

bookmark

print

close

[Report Errors](#) | [Comments](#)

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.