

In just over a week, we will celebrate Saint Patrick's Day. But who was Saint Patrick really? We might think of him as the guy who banished snakes from Ireland, then converted everyone to Christianity by noting that the three-leaf clover was a perfect symbol of the Trinity. Well, not quite.

The real Saint Patrick was a man who had quite a faith journey, one that involved moments of closeness to God like Peter, James and John experience on the mountain, but one that involved a whole lot of challenging work as well as he carried out God's plans.

Contrary to myth, Patrick did not rid Ireland of snakes—the Emerald Isle never had any—and though he might have used the three-leaf clover in a sermon, the greatest miracle he ever performed is what God made of his life.

Patricius wasn't even Irish by birth. He was born into a British Christian family sometime in the late fourth century (though it is hard to know when). It was in England that he learned his rudimentary Latin and, during the waning Roman Empire, lived in prosperity and security. Then as a teenager, he was kidnapped, whisked off to Ireland and sold as a slave to a

chieftain there, who made him a shepherd. He lived in the cold, unforgiving, damp climate with little more than the skin on his back.

Young Patricius turned to prayer to sustain himself, as he later recounted in his memoir, *Confession*. He forged a deep relationship with God while tending the flock. “In one day,” as he later wrote, “I would say as many as a hundred prayers and after dark nearly as many again, even while I remained in the woods or on the mountain. I would wake and pray before daybreak—through snow, frost, rain.”

For six years, Patrick persisted in his prayers and his work. Then one day, a mysterious voice spoke. “Your hungers are rewarded. You are going home.” Home—back to Britain. “Look, your ship is ready.”

Patrick was inland, nowhere near the sea. Where would he find a ship? Yet he trusted the words that he’d heard. He immediately set out by foot on a journey of some 200 miles, an escaped slave in unknown territory. It was a miracle he knew where to go and was not caught. He arrived at an inlet to find a ship—his ship?—full of sailors traveling to Gaul, a region in present-day Western Europe. They were transporting Irish hounds to sell there.

The captain eyed Patricius suspiciously. “You’re wasting your time asking to sail with us,” he said. What would Patrick do? There was no place to hide. It was only a matter of time before he’d be caught. All he could do was pray. Soon enough, the sailors called him back. “Come on board—we’ll take you on trust.”

When Patricius and the sailors landed in Gaul, they were surprised to find a desolate landscape—the result perhaps of the Germans wreaking havoc on the usually fertile terrain. His men starving and hopeless, the captain asked this Christian why he didn’t just call on his so-called God for help. Without hesitation, Patrick turned to the sailors and said, “From the bottom of your heart, turn trustingly to the Lord my God, for nothing is impossible to him.”

They did and, soon enough, spotted a herd of pigs coming in their direction—the most substantial food the hungry crew could hope for.

Patrick eventually returned to Britain and was reunited with his family. But once there, he realized he was not quite at home. He’d become a man without a country. He’d spent a lot of time with the people of Ireland and

grown to love them—astounding considering his enslavement by them.

One night, he had a vision. A man he knew from Ireland named Victoricus appeared to him, holding a stack of letters. He handed one to Patrick. Its heading read, in Latin, *vox hiberionacum*, or “the voice of the Irish.” Then Patrick heard the voice of the multitude, crying, “We beg you to come and walk among us once more.”

Patrick would heed the call—and return to Ireland. But first, he wanted to learn more about the faith that had sustained him in Ireland so that he could better help the people once arrived. Like someone today whose call for ministry leads to seminary, he headed to southern France, most likely to a monastery off the coast, where he underwent grueling studies and was eventually ordained a bishop.

The pope sent him on a mission mission to Ireland that began in 432, immediately after another bishop failed there. Perhaps Patrick met with success because he knew Ireland well, and understood its people, language, and customs from his time in captivity there as a youth.

Patrick devised a successful and settled strategy in his mission to the Irish. Whenever he entered a district he would first present himself to the local king and give him gifts in accord with the proper Celtic custom. He would request two favors which were usually granted: a title to a plot of land to build a church and permission to preach the Gospel to the locals. Though the kings were reticent to embrace Christianity their children were eager to learn.

It was by no means easy. Patrick was willing to risk death at the hands of his enemies the Druids and travel to what was then considered the ends of the earth to win the souls of the Irish for Christ. He wrote:

*For your sake, my Irish Christians, I traveled everywhere among great dangers. I even went to the most remote parts of the island—places at the very edge of the world, places no one had ever been before—to baptize and ordain clergy and confirm people in the faith. I did it all, with the help of God, gladly and joyfully for your sake.*

All this laid the groundwork for the mass conversion of the Irish as Patrick relates having personally baptized “countless converts”.

Patricius's journey was the first example of a mission to people outside Greek, Aware of the dangers, Patrick went to Ireland with resolve. He'd write "Every day I am ready to be murdered, betrayed, enslaved—whatever may come my way. But I am not afraid of any of these things because of the promises of heaven," he wrote. He stayed in Ireland for the next 30 years, baptizing, preaching, ordaining and teaching.

Notably, Saint Patrick was the first person in history to resolutely condemn slavery. When some of his new converts were stolen by British pirates and sold, he hurled invectives against the horrors of enslavement, a state he knew all too well. It would be more than a thousand years before anyone else spoke out so forcefully against it.

Patricius's influence on Ireland was transformational. In time, the petty warring stopped and monasteries were established—places where Scriptures would be saved, preserved and copied. As the Roman Empire disintegrated and the Dark Ages descended, chaos disappeared from the Emerald Isle, but all of this took a man to follow God's plan, which entailed prayer and listening, and a daily commitment to getting the work done after He got his marching orders - something that wasn't easy, but done with the power of the Holy Spirit to give him strength.

On this second Sunday of Lent, we hear the story of the Transfiguration of the Lord. Peter, James and John go up Mount Tabor, and have this mystical experience with God. Like Abram who becomes Abraham in our first reading, they have this mystical experience with God and listen to him. Patrick did the same thing in his life time and time again, hearing God's voice through the prayers in his enslavement, and then hearing it again when he returned to Ireland.

As a starting point, our first reading and Gospel and Patrick's story along with the story of so many of the saints illustrate the importance of prayer. Being with the Lord is not a duty, but is a wonderful place to be. Of course, we cannot, and indeed shouldn't, simply stay, avoiding the realities of our daily lives. But what might those struggles look like once we've climbed the mountain, and given ourselves time to rest in God? Perhaps the burdens we carry, the challenges of our vocation, the rough and tumble of loving our neighbor might be a totally different proposition. Unless you are an ordained priest or deacon, you don't have a requirement to pray per se. And it's easy to have prayer fall by the wayside; we get busy, have to get up get ourselves ready or the kids ready, run to work and school, get busy

afterwards, and fill ourselves with so many things. But finding time for prayer in our daily lives can give us that clarity we need to know what God wants us to do, and to be better suited for the mission. By praying, we first of all open ourselves up to God, and focus our whole being on him and not on ourselves or any of the good things of the world. Prayer gets us in the habit of relating properly to God as the Father of us all.

But remember, the story does not end on the mountain. It ends with Jesus and the three disciples coming down from the mountain, leaving behind their brief respite of prayer, leaving behind the company of the saints who joined the transfigured Jesus. In his overwhelming joy at the experience, Peter had wanted to stay put, build tents. But that is not an option. They have to come down from the mountain. Patrick had to as well from his “mountain” of being home and happy, and go back to Ireland. And before that the voice of the Father has rung out from heaven: ‘This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.’ If we listen to Jesus, we will learn that we must spend time apart in prayer in the company of God and the saints; but we also learn from Jesus that we must come down from the mountain too. What happens next in Matthew’s Gospel, when they reach the crowd again, is

that a father brings his son to Jesus for an exorcism. The son has suffered terribly through sickness, in this case brought on by a demon. Jesus rebukes the demon, he comes out instantly, and the boy is cured. So what Jesus has left prayer and communion with the saints for turns out to be the work of liberating a human being, freeing him from evil. As we hear in the second reading, “bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God.”

That’s a great message for Lent too, to be reminded that like Peter, James and John, and like Patrick, we have a job to do. To free people from whatever it is that is holding them back from the fullness of life God wants for them. We can free people with the truth like Patrick did, by being an apologist for the faith, by encouraging people to go to Mass and not giving up when people we know leave the faith . We can free the sick by caring for them with the gift of our time. We can open our eyes to see those who are in need and do what we can to minister to them. Of course all of this too involves difficulty. There’s the time commitment, but also the need to be patient, and to recognize that just as Patrick found out, there’s hostility. Talk to anyone who’s been a sidewalk counselor at Planned Parenthood, challenged a loved one on a lifestyle decision, or taken a stand in public

against something that is immoral but the world accepts as completely normal. Remember, when Jesus comes down from the mountain, he not only heals that boy, but He journeys all the way to the cross to liberate others. In that act, He gives himself entirely to God and to us. And that is our goal too, to do what Patrick did - to give ourselves entirely to God and others. To do this, we pray and discern, but we then go to work - it's not easy, but God will always be with us.

Someday we won't have to leave the mountain, and we will be with Jesus forever. It is good for Peter, James and John to be there to get that glimpse of heaven; and it is good for us to be here at Mass to get that glimpse too when we gaze upon the Holy Eucharist. God loves us so much, but let's never forget that this love requires a response. Now is the time to be with God, but also to again quote Saint Teresa of Avila, "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours." God has big plans for us all, and the also all entail brining ourselves closer to Him but

others too. So listen to Him by letting Him into your life, and remember that the mission He gives may not always be easy but He is with you and me step by step, when like Patrick, you take those steps to bring you and others closer to Him through the mountain that is life into the eternal joy of the heavenly kingdom.