

March 17: St Patrick

St Patrick is the face of Ireland. So much so that it sometimes hard to know how far Ireland and its people are reshaped to wear St Patrick's face and how far St Patrick is remodelled to fit whatever image that we have of Irish people. For those of us with some link to Irish roots our image of St Patrick might be of a stately man with mitre and staff on a field of green with snakes scurrying away from it, presiding genially over the Irish dancing, the marches through the city, the haunting folk songs and the pints of Guinness that mark his feast day.

Like the story of his fellow Patron St Brigid, St Patrick's life is a fairly empty page on which generations of people have written. Perhaps the two best known stories that we see represented in many of the paintings of him tell us how he drove the snakes out of Ireland and how he used the image of the three leafed shamrock to teach his people how we might think of God as three in one. Both these stories seem to date from many centuries after his death. But they remain popular because they show vividly the difference that St Patrick's preaching made to people's lives, and how closely in Irish devotion God's presence is intertwined with the beauty and the detail of the natural world.

According to St Patrick's own brief account of his beginnings he grew up in northern England in the late fourth century, but as an adolescent was captured by pirates and sold as a slave in Ireland. As a young adult he became Christian. He felt called to escape from captivity and to make his way back to England where he became a priest and later Bishop. He was famous for preaching the Gospel in a society where he faced many disadvantages. In a society in which clan and the exchange of gifts were central in all relationships, he accepted no gifts and belonged to no clan. He appears to have directed his preaching to women, many of whom he encouraged to live the monastic life. He certainly made enemies because of the success of his preaching. His account of his early life is preserved as part of his defense against the accusation that he had been motivated by the thirst for money.

Perhaps we come closest to entering Patrick's inner life through a hymn attributed to him often referred to as St Patrick's Breastplate. It imagines putting on all the things that God has given us as armour against sin, including the beauty and strength of nature:

I bind to myself to-day,
The power of Heaven,
The light of the Sun,
The whiteness of Snow,^[13]
The force of Fire,
The flashing of lightning,
The velocity of Wind,
The depth of the Sea,
The stability of the Earth,
The hardness of Rocks.

By Fr Andrew Hamilton