

Sermon HIW 17th March 2013 St. Patrick's Day

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As you have heard it is St. Patrick's Day today.

Let's therefore first take a brief look at the person who is said to have died on March 17th 493, 1520 years ago.

Well, first thing, which might be a surprise to you: St. Patrick was not Irish. He was a Briton, born in what is now called Wales. Since his father was a deacon and his grandfather a priest, Patrick had quite a religious upbringing. When he was about sixteen, he was out working in his father's field when Irish militia raided the land. Patrick was kidnapped and carried off as a slave to Ireland. There he worked as a herdsman, remaining a captive for six years. During that time he writes that his faith grew and that he prayed daily. After six years he finally escaped by stowing away on a ship, traveling more than two-hundred miles, and finally returning home. When he was of age, he followed in his father's and grandfather's footsteps, eventually becoming a bishop in the church. But later in his life Patrick felt called to become a missionary—to go back to the land in which he had been a slave and share the message of the Gospel. Over the course of about 60 years, Patrick went the length and breadth of Ireland preaching the Gospel, ordaining elders and establishing over 300 churches. It is said he "found Ireland all heathen and left it all Christian". He baptized more than 120,000 people. A basic understanding of the culture in which he achieved this makes it all the more remarkable. The Ireland to which Patrick returned practiced a religion of animistic polytheism. There was a strong belief in all kinds of gods such as the sun or the moon. The Irish had a preoccupation with demons, fairies, and elves, wells and rivers were associated with goddesses. And the Druids were the high class kind of priests. The white robed druid priests practiced prophecy; they counseled kings, formulated laws, and obviously even sacrificed first born children on open air altars.

So how on earth did St. Patrick and his associates manage to turn Ireland into a Christian country?

I think first of all it was the simplicity of their message. Patrick relied on simple illustrations. Legend says, and usually there is a core of truth in all legends, that he used the shamrock, the three-leaf clover, to explain what Trinity means. The shamrock was a symbol of national pride in Ireland at the time. Each leaf is separate and distinct, yet part of the whole. It's just one clover, yet with three individual leaves. Likewise it is with the Trinity of God. It is one God but with three individual natures: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus countless Irish men and women, ordinary people as well as the more educated Druids, were able to understand and accept the concept of the Trinitarian God. By the way, that's something that strikes me over

and over again. Nothing against an intellectual approach to and understanding of our Christian belief. But often I think that the more basic or elementary the way somebody explains the Christian belief, the more it reaches one's heart and mind. In Scotland, and I am sure elsewhere as well, they usually have a special children's address during the worship service. Often they have simple things, a puppet or an everyday gadget, to bring across the Christian message to the children and as an adult you can be dead sure that at home you are able to remember the children's address far better than the sophisticated and lengthy sermon later in the service. Well, I wonder what that means for my sermon today.

But there was something else that I presume was an even stronger contribution to St. Patrick's success, and that was his belief and that he was deeply rooted in an unshakable trust in God. St. Patrick had a kind of biblical watchword for his life. Most of us probably have that, too, a biblical verse that was given to us at our baptism, confirmation or wedding, a biblical verse that turned out to be a kind of guideline for our life. Have you got such a watchword that perhaps has helped you to cope with life? Or if you don't have a special verse, what is it that makes you hold on to your belief however shaky it may be at times? For St. Patrick it was a verse from Paul's letter to the Ephesians chapter 6. What Patrick wrote about what this verse meant to him, later became known as St. Patrick's Breastplate. In verse 14 we read: "Stand firm then – this reminds me of Martin Luther's famous word when he stood before the Diet of Worms: Here I stand, I can do no other – "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place", and verse 15 follows: "and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace."

Of course St. Patrick was a missionary and one could say a lot about his mission work and its meaning for us today. How can we do mission work in our times today? But that's not the focus of my sermon today. I would rather follow the question: What made St. Patrick strong in a non-Christian and sometimes hostile surrounding? Wasn't it a rather lonely existence to begin with? Wasn't he afraid? How did he get the courage and what could we learn from that?

Well, Patrick certainly knew the trials and tribulations of life. I already mentioned his six years of slavery when he was a teenager. That was by no means a bed of roses.

By the way, because of Patrick's work and preaching slavery was ended in Ireland in the same century.

Later in his Confessions he wrote about anxious journeys, difficulties and disappointments and that he had to combat the powers of darkness in the priesthood of the Druids. And then there was Coroticus, a British prince. He came and slaughtered a number of converts whom Patrick had baptized. I am sure there were times when Patrick was in despair and angry and

also uncertain wondering whether he was doing the right thing when there were difficulties and obstacles over and over again.

Today's challenges are rather different, but we, too, are often confronted with hardship. There is someone who can't cope with what is demanded of him at school or at work. He is trying his best but just can't reach the goal that is set. Or when you are hit by a stroke of fate or an unexpected illness. Or when you are imprisoned in a relationship that you can't escape or when you get lost after losing a beloved one. But we get also upset because of social or political situations when there is never ending conflicts and violence between different religious or ethnic groups, when there is again a suicidal bomber who killed many innocent people. Or when here in Germany foreigners are harassed or attacked or even killed. Or when you lose your job out of the blue and don't know how to pay your debts and how to make ends meet.

St. Patrick obviously got strength through praying - we, too, know the healing and strengthening power of praying when we are in despair. And he got strength out of this verse from the letter to the Ephesians. "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round you". Note that it doesn't say that you have to make an effort and try and put the belt round you yourself. It has already been put round you, so to speak, when you were baptized when God promised to stay by your side whatever might happen. It is because of this that you are able to stand firm, by the grace and love of God and not first and foremost by your own efforts. The belt of truth has been buckled round your waist with the breastplate of righteousness in place. Truth and righteousness against untruth and injustice that so often ruled the world then and still do.

I must admit I have some difficulties with the picture of a breastplate, don't you? It has a rather strong militaristic connotation which on the other hand shows us the severity of the conflicts of the first Christians. But I think there are other "breastplates", things that signal protection. Have you got a sort of breastplate yourself? What is it?

My "breastplate", when I was a child, was a cardboard cross which shone through the night after holding it under a light bulb. In the darkness of the night or when I was not feeling well or when I was afraid this shining cross was very reassuring and comforting. It stood for God's continuous presence. Later I became aware of what was written in today's epistle:

"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from earth". That means Jesus himself knew what it meant to suffer and to be afraid. Think of his crying to his father on the cross. My Gog, my God, why have you forsaken me?! If Jesus himself went through such terrible times then I can be sure that he knows what I feel like in dark moments. His cross is a sign of his continuous presence.

But Christian belief is never just private. It urges us to reach out to others. The experience of being loved and protected by God urges us to love and protect others. Or, as verse 15 has it, “with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.” It is exactly what St. Patrick did. Protected by the breastplate of righteousness he preached the gospel of peace and brought about peace in a country which was still marked by basically uncivilised structures and behaviour. And should there be unrest and violence on St. Patrick’s Day in Ireland today or in the future people should be reminded of this message of peace that shaped Ireland’s society centuries ago. And whenever we are confronted with injustice in our country here and in everyday life we are invited and summoned to stand up, to stand firm then, to speak out, to be advocate for others when they are being bossed about or harassed or looked down upon because they are different or weaker or disadvantaged. We are called not to cover up but to reveal injustice and machinations; we are called not to avoid conflicts but to solve conflicts not in a violent but in a non-violent way. By doing this we would truly live up to the heritage of St. Patrick and more over to the heritage of Jesus Christ. He is the prince of peace. He provides us with the belt of truth and with the breastplate of righteousness in order to bring about justice and peace and love where there is hate. May St. Patrick’s Day be a reminder of how we can cope with hardship in our lives and in our world and how we can make life and our world more loving and more peaceful.

And the love of God which surpasses all our understanding may keep us in Jesus Christ our
Lord and Saviour

Amen