

The Celtic Way of Evangelism

St Philip's Anglican Church
Revd Jeannette McHugh
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – 21 June 2015

About a month ago Pat Forbes suggested to me that given the feast day of St Columba was June 9th, that perhaps it would be appropriate to have a Celtic flavour to our worship in one of our services in June.

I agreed with her, we had done this some years ago.

So you will find that our music and singing today has its roots in Celtic Christianity.

Now I thought that I could cover the lives of Patrick and Columba, Ireland's two most famous saints, and explain how Celtic Christianity has influenced our understanding and experience of Christianity in fifteen minutes, and then we would pray together the great Irish prayer St Patrick's breastplate.

Wrong! We will have to have more Celtic music next week to learn more about the Celtic Way of Evangelism and liturgy.

When I started to read about St Patrick in this book **The Celtic Way of Evangelism**, I realised how little I knew about him and how grateful I was to George G Hunter III for his succinct and believable story of Patrick's life. I would like to share with you how he has charted the murky waters of St Patrick's life. If you google information about him, it is impossible to know what to believe, especially as while there might be a degree of agreement about his birth date as around 385AD, his death is given with great certainty as either 493 or 460 – only 33 years difference!

St Patrick's liturgical day is March 17th, the date of his supposed death. It has become a day of revelry and foolishness. However, there is much more to Patrick than wearing green, Irish dancing, and significant drinking in pubs and clubs,

It was Patrick who introduced Christianity into Ireland and within a couple of generations, the Celtic people, who were considered barbarians by the Roman church, had been converted to Christianity.

In the late fourth century AD Patrick was growing up in what is now northeast England. His people were 'Britons,' one of the Celtic peoples then populating the British Isles, though Patrick's aristocratic family had gone 'Roman' during the Roman occupation of England. So Patrick was more culturally Roman than Celtic. His first language was Latin, though he understood some of the "Welsh" language spoken by the 'lower classes'. His family was Christian, his grandfather was a priest. Patrick had acquired some Christian teaching, and he undoubtedly knew the catechism, but he became only a nominal Christian. He ridiculed the clergy and, in the company of other 'alienated' and 'ungoverned' youths, lived toward the wild side!

When Patrick was sixteen, a band of Celtic pirates from Ireland invaded the region. They captured Patrick and many other young men, forced them onto a ship, sailed to Ireland, and sold them into slavery. The pirates sold Patrick to a prosperous tribal chief and druid named Miliuc who put Patrick to work herding cattle. (Other sources say sheep!)

During his years of enslavement Patrick experienced three profound changes.

First, the period when Patrick was isolated in the wilderness herding cattle connected him with what theologians call the 'natural revelation' of God. He sensed with the winds, the seasons, the creatures, and the nights under the stars, the presence of God; he identified this

presence with the Triune God he had learned about in the catechism. In his (more or less) autobiographical “Declaration” Patrick tells us:

After I had arrived in Ireland, I found myself pasturing flocks daily, and I prayed a number of times each day. More and more the love and fear of God came to me, and faith grew and my spirit was exercised, until I was praying up to a hundred times every day and in the night nearly as often.

Patrick became a devout Christian, and the change was obvious to his captors.

Second, Patrick changed in another way during the period he spent with his captors in their settlement. He came to understand the Irish Celtic people, and their language and culture, with the kind of intuitive profundity that is usually possible only, as in Patrick’s case, from the ‘underside’

Third, Patrick came to love his captors, to identify with them and to hope for their reconciliation to God. One day, he would feel they were his people.

One night, after six years of captivity, a voice spoke to Patrick in a dream, saying “You are going home. Look! Your ship is ready!” The voice directed him to flee for his freedom the next morning. He awakened before daybreak, walked to a sea coast, saw the ship, and negotiated his way on board.

The data for piecing together the next quarter century (25 years!) of Patrick’s story are limited, and scholars disagree when interpreting the scant data we have, but the story line runs something like this. The ship probably took Patrick to Gaul, or perhaps to England. He may have spent considerable time in Gaul, perhaps with the monastic community of St Martin of Tours, and he may have gone to Rome, but he eventually returned to his people in England. He trained for the priesthood, perhaps in Rome, or in Gaul, or more likely in England! His training immersed his mind in the scriptures, and grounded him in the basic orthodox theology that prevailed in the Western Church of that time. He then served for years as a faithful parish priest in England.

One night, at the age of forty eight, already past a man’s life expectancy in the fifth century – Patrick experienced another dream that was to change his life again.

An angel named Victor approached him with letters from his former captors in Ireland. As he read one of the letters he **‘imagined in that moment that I heard the voice of those very people who were near the wood of Foclut ... and they cried out, as with one voice, ‘We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us.’**

When Patrick awakened the next morning, he interpreted the dream as his ‘Macedonian Call’, (like St Paul’s dream to go over the sea to Macedonia,) to take the Christian gospel to the Celtic peoples of Ireland. He proposed to his ecclesiastical superiors, that he be sent on this mission. The bishops of the British Church, probably with the strong encouragement of Pope Celestine, affirmed Patrick’s vision. Patrick was ordained a bishop, and appointed to Ireland, as history’s first missionary bishop.

The tradition tells us that he arrived in Ireland, with a modest entourage of priests, seminarians, and others, in AD 432.

That’s all we have time for today. Next week we will find out how he changed the illiterate Irish people, who were regarded as barbarians, into a people with a Christian faith within two or three generations.

George G Hunter III insists there are lessons for the Christian Church in the West today, which means there are lessons for us here at St Philips.

Let us see what we can learn from St Patrick’s Way of Evangelism next week. Amen