

St Patrick (B)
(Jeremiah 1:4-9 / Mark 16:15-20)
17.03.2015
Nation

When we arrived in Rostrevor, one of the first things Fr Malachy Toner told us was that he disagreed with most of the contemporary scholars who declare that St Patrick was originally from Britain, for him St Patrick was French.

While it was certainly good news for the French monks, historical evidences support the theory that St Patrick was from Britain and was educated in France.

Later I heard somebody else from Rostrevor stating that St Brigid was the first Irish saint because, unlike St Patrick, she was local, as we say in this part of the world.

It seems to me that it is a good thing that St Patrick was not Irish. Born in one culture and educated in another, St Patrick challenges our parochial mindset, our narrow vision of what it means to be a Christian. Let us recognise that we are often tempted to make our God very small, to reduce the Gospel to the culture and habits of our time and place. There is indeed a risk for us to become sectarian, to make of our faith a fence which separates our community, our parish, our tribe or our country from others.

In his Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus, St Patrick writes: “The truth of Christ has aroused me, out of love for my neighbours and children, for whom I have given up country and kinsfolk, and my own life even to death” (Duffy, p. 98). St Patrick was very aware of the fact that he was not Irish, and yet his priorities were in the right order: as a Christian what mattered to him were not the family ties which linked him to the place where he was born, to a culture which nurtured him, but Christ and his love for all. Ultimately St Patrick’s roots, background and education were not a fence, a barrier or a wall, something to defend and protect but a bridge which allowed him to feel at home wherever he was. So this explains why he can write in the same letter: “I am a servant in Christ to a far-off nation on account of the indescribable glory of eternal life which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Id, p. 101).

And the paradox is that ultimately because of his Christian identity, St Patrick considers himself as an Irishman, when he speaks of himself and of his people, he dares to say: “We are Irish” (Id, p. 103). Reflecting on Britain, the place of his birth, and on his family, he claims that these ties are nothing compared to those which connect him to Ireland. In his *Confession*, St Patrick affirms that he “is tied by the Spirit” (n. 43) to the people of Ireland.

What seems to me important here is that St Patrick challenges any form of national identity which would be monocultural or exclusive, founded on subtle expressions of racism or sectarianism. He is able to do so because he is himself the fruit of a dialogue between different cultures and because, and above all, his first identity is rooted in Christ. Gospel values shape and inform his earthly citizenship, they inspire his decisions and help him to build up an inclusive and diverse society.

Last year, in Strasbourg, Pope Francis reminded the members of the European Council that, I quote, “culture is always born of reciprocal encounter which seeks to stimulate the intellectual riches and creativity of those who take part in it” (25.11.2014). If we wish to remain faithful to St Patrick’s heritage, we have to consent to encounter and dialogue with other cultures. The problem is that in our cultures there are elements which are not worth being perpetuated. There are aspects of our cultures which need to be purified. Sometimes

here in Northern Ireland, we may have the impression that because something is supposedly cultural it cannot be touched or removed.

The fact is that when a culture is no longer able to dialogue with others, when it is unable to grow and to change somewhat, this means that the time has come for it to die and to enter into a museum to be referred to as something from the past.

Because we believe that, as Christians, we are experts in humanity, we have a special responsibility towards our cultures and our nations.

With God's Spirit, we are equipped to encourage and foster what is truly human in them and to challenge all that is part of a certain culture of death.

In his *Confession*, St Patrick tells us that he was sent "to a people in need and want" (n. 40). Maybe the question for us today is: what do we really want? What do we think we need?

If we are just self-obsessed, looking for security and wealth, afraid of the other, of anyone who thinks differently, so wrapped up in our self-righteousness and convictions that we do not want to dialogue and learn from others, then maybe we are going to create a cosy and uniform society but at the same time we are digging the grave of what is truly life-giving in our culture.

At the moment in our world, among Muslims, there are some who are trying, violently and hopelessly to secure closed societies and cultures. In Eastern Europe, in Russia for example, Christian Orthodoxy is a good example of what we should not do regarding politics and religion. In France and in the United Kingdom, political parties which are against Europe, against foreigners, against almost everything but themselves are attracting people.

In 2009, Pope Emeritus Benedict warned us that all Churches are tempted to "lapse into nationalism, into identification with a specific culture" and that his ministry as successor of Peter was precisely to "guarantee a catholicity which implies multiplicity, richness of cultures and respect for diversity" (Meeting with the Parish Priests and the Clergy of the Diocese of Rome, 26.02.2009).

Today, if we want to honour St Patrick and truly give thanks for his grace-filled ministry, we must be rooted and grounded in Christ and his Gospel. In returning to our Christian roots we will be able to evangelise and humanise our cultures and European countries.

Fifty years ago, the 2nd Vatican Council reminded us that as Christians "gathered into the Church from every nation (...) we should live for God and Christ according to the honourable usages of our country. As good citizens we should sincerely actively foster love of country, while utterly rejecting racial hatred or exaggerated nationalism, and work for universal love among all men and women" (AG 15).

May St Patrick pray for us so that we may be in truth "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" and "proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1P 2:9).