

Solemnity of St Patrick
(Jeremiah 1:4-9 / Mark 16:15-20)
17.03.2021

In the readings heard this morning we had a vocation story (that of Jeremiah, the prophet) and the ending of Mark's Gospel (the account of Jesus' taking leave of this world in His earthly life). In the Marcan text we heard the Risen Lord confide to His disciples the charge to pursue His mission in the world. This ending of Mark's Gospel concerns all of us, who are called to be Christ's missionary disciples in this day and age.

Reading these Scripture texts, passages from Patrick's *Confessio* come to mind.

I find myself thinking first of the opening of *The Confessions of St Patrick* – that paragraph in which the Saint presents himself: I, Patrick, am a sinner, the most awkward of country bumpkins, the least of all the faithful, the most contemptible amongst very many. Patrick speaks of his origins: My father was Calpornius, a deacon, son of a certain Potitus, a priest of the village of Bannavem Taburniae, and there I was captured by slave traders. In the next few lines Patrick tells us that he was brought to this island as a slave. He goes on to explain the good that came out of that misfortune in his life: In Ireland the Lord opened my eyes to my unbelief, so that I might at last face up to my wickedness and be converted with all my heart to the Lord my God. He (...) had mercy on my youth and ignorance. Even before I knew Him, He watched over me. Before I was able to tell good from evil, He protected me and comforted me as a father would his son. The scene is set for us to understand what Patrick will go on to recount: the story of his life as a Christian disciple and the particular mission confided to him to serve as the Lord's Apostle to this island of Ireland.

Reading the opening of Patrick's *Confessio*, I am struck by a sort of parallel with the text from Jeremiah heard this morning. In our first Scripture reading the prophet also introduced himself and shared with us how he received his prophetic vocation. Jeremiah told us he was born into a priestly clan and heard his initial call to the prophetic ministry when he was just a youth. (In the verses immediately preceding those read in our lectionary reading today, the prophet is presented as Jeremiah, the priest, the son of Hilkah, who lived in the town of Anathoth in the land of Benjamin.) As is the case with Patrick in the *Confessio*, we are given the name of Jeremiah's parentage and birth place. Both men are situated, as it were, before their stories progress any further. We are told from the outset who it is we are dealing with. In the text read in the liturgy today, Jeremiah expresses something Patrick also touches upon his *Confessio*: namely, a sense of the Lord having watched over him and prepared him for his mission... and this, despite his apparent ill-preparedness, due to his ignorance and youth. In a very real sense neither Jeremiah nor Patrick were qualified for the respective missions that were to be theirs. But, what is shown to us in the way both men present themselves is actually what made both of them fit for what the Lord asked of them: in a word, that was their humility (their humble lucidity, we might say), coupled with their God-given eagerness to serve. It wasn't that either Jeremiah or Patrick felt competent for what was asked of them, but, what is clear is that they both trusted in the Lord. It seems to me that they were obliged to trust in the Lord all the more, because they were only too well aware of their own shortcomings. Jeremiah and Patrick both had to confide themselves to God's power at work in and through them, because of their own recognised inherent weaknesses. Both the Old Testament prophet and the Apostle to Ireland were honest enough in their self-assessment to realise for themselves and to share with their readers that any good accomplished in and through them would come not from their own strength, but from reliance upon God's grace at work within them... God's grace which makes itself felt best in human weakness. We will hear echoes of the Apostle Paul there. The reasoning of both Jeremiah and Patrick was that of every true servant of the Lord. It is that of all those

who have been and are used mightily by God to accomplish important missions on His behalf. It is never out of a sense of self-sufficiency that servants of the Lord minister, but always out of a sense of their dependency upon God's grace alone. It is from this point of departure that a way opened up for the unfolding of the ministerial stories of both Jeremiah and Patrick. It is from the same point of departure that the way opens up for us as well, as we set out to serve God, doing whatever He tells us in His service, and that for the good of His people.

The second text from Patrick's *Confessio* that comes to mind today (and this given the Gospel passage we heard read) is that in which Patrick reflects upon what he was given to live in his years of ministry in this land. Patrick shares his experience with us: I owe an immense debt to God, who granted me so much grace that many people in Ireland were reborn to God through me. Clergy were ordained everywhere to look after these people, who had come to trust the Lord who called them from the ends of the earth. It was essential that we spread out nets so that a great multitude should be taken for God, and that there were plenty of clergy to baptise and counsel people, as the Lord tells us to do in the Gospel. So it came about that Ireland, a land filled with people who never had the knowledge of God, but worshipped idols and other foul objects, now has a people of the Lord who are called the children of God. It was not my grace, but God, victorious in me, who resisted all opposition when I came to the people of Ireland to preach the Gospel and to suffer many insults from unbelievers. If I should be worthy, I am ready to give my life most willingly and unhesitatingly for His Name. I am bound by the Spirit who witnesses to me. Christ the Lord told me to come here and stay with the people for the rest of my life, if He wills, and He will guard me from very evil that I might not sin before Him. For me there is a real parallel between this passage from the *Confessio* and the Gospel text proposed for our meditation this morning: The Great Commission.

What comes across in both Patrick's *Confessio* and Mark's Great Commission is a sense of God compelling His disciples to announce the Good News to others. In both these texts we are reminded of our vocation as baptised men and women: our vocation to be what Pope Francis calls missionary disciples.

While Patrick makes much of the fact that he ordained clergy for the mission (and elsewhere he will speak of the impact his evangelisation had upon the young people of Ireland, leading many of them to choose to serve the Lord in monastic life), it is important to grasp that Ireland's saintly patron saw the clergy's role as being to animate the life of the wider body of missionary disciples made up of all those who were baptised into the Christian faith. Patrick saw all these as being sent out, 'missioned', commissioned, to share the Gospel with their fellow-citizens. In Patrick's understanding, the clergy were not to live the Church's life for her. Let us be clear on this point. The clergy are most certainly not meant to do so today! The Church is not just the clergy! The Church is all God's People! To preach the Gospel is the mission of all the baptised, as Pope Francis is constantly reminding us. Saying that, I think of what he had to say to the Irish Bishops in August 2018, just before taking leave of Ireland, to whence he had come to participate in the World Meeting of Families. Pope Francis made it clear in that address to the Irish Bishops that he saw the clergy (especially the Bishops themselves) having a key role to play in the evangelisation process, but he did not ignore the importance of all the Church being engaged with them in the mission. Pope Francis made it clear the much needed new evangelisation required in Ireland today depends upon all the baptised. (Cardinal Grech made this same point very strongly when addressing the Irish Episcopal Conference more recently when he reflected with them on the importance of a synodal approach in the life and functioning of the Irish Church.) Pope Francis continually emphasises: It is baptism, not ordination, that engages men and women to be missionary disciples. Speaking to the Bishops when he addressed them at the Dominican Covent, Cabra, in August 2018, Pope Francis said that he wanted Irish Catholics to be missionary disciples. He began by addressing the bishops

themselves regarding their responsibility here: All of us, as bishops, are conscious of our responsibility to be fathers to God's holy and faithful people. As good fathers, we want to encourage and inspire, to reconcile and unify, and above all, to preserve all the good handed down from generation to generation in this great family which is the Church in Ireland. It is true, the Church in Ireland remains strong; it is true. So, my word to you this evening is one of encouragement (...) for your efforts, in these challenging times, to persevere in your ministry as heralds of the Gospel and shepherds of Christ's flock. The Pope went on to speak of the need for a genuine concern for and attention to the poor, the excluded and those in need of a helping hand. He then spoke of the Bishops' need to support their hurt and discouraged priests, whose pain in the face of recent scandals can often be ignored or underestimated. He pleaded with the Bishops: Be close to your priests! For you, as bishops, they are the closest of your neighbours. What Pope Francis had to say to the Bishops about the pastoral care of their clergy reminded me of Patrick's concern for those he associated with him in his ministry – a concern for and attention to his closest collaborators expressed in the section from his *Confessio* read a few moments ago.

Pope Francis did not mince his words in regard to the gravity and extent of sexual abuse and the abuse of power and conscience in various social settings. He spoke of the Irish Church's painful and even shameful history in this regard, encouraging honesty and integrity in the way with which the Church must choose to confront this painful chapter of her history – suggesting that this can be part of the Church's mission to the world. Moreover, he claimed that the Church can perhaps offer an example and a warning to society as a whole in respect to the remedying of the abuse of power.

One thing the Pope asked of the Bishops, imploring them to listen to him particularly on this point, was the need to exercise a ministry of proximity to the People of this land – a proximity to all the people of this land... a ministry of proximity to people rooted in a closeness to and an intimacy with the Lord. He said to the Bishops: I ask you, please, to be close – this is the word, 'closeness' – to the Lord and to God's people. Closeness. Do not repeat the attitudes of aloofness and clericalism that at times in your history have given the real image of an authoritarian, harsh and autocratic Church. Having addressed the Bishops on their important role, Pope Francis went on to make it clear that not everything depends upon the Bishops. We could only expect that, given that he is forever wanting to widen the Church's sense of missionary responsibility to include all the baptised. For Pope Francis everything depends upon all the people of God being engaged in the mission confided to us by the Lord. Everything depends upon all the baptised ministering together, not each one off his or her own bat, but all the faithful together, witnessing in the power God's Holy Name.

This means that much depends upon all Christians being gathered together as one. So much depends upon all Christians being in communion with all their brothers and sisters in the faith, bearing witness to Christ together. This is the logic of Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in John 17. Pope Francis spoke especially to families. What he said about family life is particularly relevant to the Special Year of St Joseph, Year of the Family. Pope Francis said: Passing on the Faith essentially takes place in the family; the Faith is passed on in everyday speech, the language of the family. He spoke of how programmes of religious instruction have an indispensable role in creating a culture of Faith and a sense of missionary discipleship. He reminded us how genuine religious formation calls for faithful and joyful committed Christian witnesses who are able to shape not only minds but also hearts in the love of Christ and in the practice of prayer. He made the point that sometimes we can think that Faith formation means teaching religious concepts, and we don't think of forming the heart, shaping attitudes. Forming the mind, yes, but also the heart. And teaching how to pray: teaching children how to pray from the very start. Prayer is essential for the future of the Christian community, in which a committed laity will be increasingly called to bring the wisdom and values of their Faith to their engagement in the

varied sectors of the country's social, cultural and political life. Pope Francis reminded us that the upheavals of recent years have tested the traditionally strong Faith of the Irish people. Yet they have also offered the opportunity for an interior renewal of the Church in this country and pointed to new ways of envisioning its life and mission. Pope Francis encouraged us to be renewed in humility and trust in God's grace, so as to be able to discern and set out on new paths for these new times. He exhorted us to be courageous and creative, saying: Surely, the strong missionary sense rooted in the soul of your people will inspire creative ways of bearing witness to the truth of the Gospel and building up the community of believers in the love of Christ and zeal for the growth of his kingdom. He also emphasised something we so badly need to hear in Ireland – given our divisions and how these have so badly damaged and wounded our Christian testimony: the importance of fostering the spirit of ecclesial communion! He said: I ask you to foster unity, stressing how very important it is for us to be united across the Christian denominations and seen to be working together and praying together fervently for reconciliation and peace among all the members of the Irish family.

Each one of us has been called and chosen. We have all been given the mission to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. Not just by our words, but by our whole way of life. The testimony of our lives shaped by the Gospel will impact others more than any words we speak or any texts we may be led to quote. By our person we are called to give expression to the Gospel. We may feel inadequate for the task. We may feel shy and awkward about speaking. We may think that our testimony isn't really that important. We may even consider that our particular story is somewhat trivial. We may be of the opinion that we have little to say that could help anyone. Some of us will also struggle to move beyond the shame of our past; to come to terms with our poverty and our weaknesses of one sort or another. None of this should be allowed to deter us in our mission. The Confessio shows us how Patrick struggled with his past, his poverty, his weaknesses – and yet he witnessed boldly to Christ, knowing that this was asked of him. I am convinced that the Lord has placed His confidence in all of us to bear witness to His Gospel. What is required of us to fulfil the mission confided to us is that we dare to trust in the Lord's grace at work in our weakness. He wants us to willingly allow ourselves to become His missionary disciples. The Great Commission in Mark's Gospel is clear. We are to go out into all the world and preach the Good News... to everyone, everywhere. As I have said... Not just using words! Not necessarily by formal preaching! But by our whole way of life.