

St Patrick
(Amos 7:12-15 / Luke 5:1-11)
17.03.2022

Ego Patricius Peccator.
I Patrick a sinner.

It is with these words that Patrick opens his famous Confessio. In this text Patrick marvels at God's grace at work in his favour; he thanks the Lord for having called him into His service and that of the people of Ireland. In his Confessions the saint tells us something of his story – sharing much with his readers, if not quite everything. While he speaks of a terrible sin of his youth, for example – something of which he will forever remain ashamed – he never reveals to us what exactly this sin was. It remains a secret. In all our lives – as in Patrick's – there are some things known only to God... and it will always remain so. We have all been touched by God's grace in ways others will never be aware of.

The Saint's self-presentation – Ego Patricius Peccator, I Patrick a sinner – came back to me immediately when I read the Gospel passage proposed for our meditation this morning. In this text we heard the fisherman Peter, who was given the mission from this point onwards of catching men and women for the kingdom, turn to Christ and say to Him: Be gone from me for I am a sinful man, or, as I already rendered that line in a recent reflection with you: Lord, I am too much of a sinner for you to have me around. When Peter encountered the Lord's holiness, he was filled with a profound sense of his own sinfulness. The awestruck fisherman of Galilee spontaneously declared his sense of unworthiness in the Master's presence. He didn't see himself fit for the Lord's service. His Confessio reveals to us that Patrick felt something of the same thing.

I suspect many – indeed, most – of us will appreciate how both Peter and Patrick felt when we have found ourselves in the Lord's presence, touched by the choice He has made of us, only too well aware that this choice is not because of anything great within us... and certainly not because of our impeccability. If we are at all lucid we will realise that the Lord's call in our lives is nothing other than an act of merciful love, an amazing grace, that can only leave us feeling awestruck... and, at the very same time, overcome with a sense of our personal unworthiness.

The prophet Amos whose memory is evoked for us by today's first reading had something of the same experience as Peter, in the Gospel story read, and Patrick, as he presents himself in his Confessio. This Old Testament prophet – from the 8th century before Jesus Christ – was graced to have a sense of God's greatness; he was endowed with a profound insight into God's holiness, coupled with a lucidity around his own littleness and unworthiness. Amos – the shepherd boy from Tekoa who also tried his hand as a trimmer of sycamore trees – could but marvel at God's call in his life, feeling a kind of stupefaction that the great High God should look down upon someone as lowly as himself. We can take it that it was Amos' sense of his own unworthiness and sin that have him the insight and the simplicity of heart he needed to be able to address the people of his day in the way he did... recalling to them God's holiness and greatness, while reminding them of their own sinful and miserable state. No doubt, it was Amos' experience of God's call in his own poor life that gave him the audacity to speak to the people whom he addressed his words, reminding them of their radical need to experience the Lord's forgiving love through an engagement in the way of repentance.

In Amos' day many of the people of Israel carried on with the outward show of religion, even though they had abandoned a heartfelt faith in God. This had led them into the sorrowful state they were in. Israelite society was corrupt; its religion was in no better condition. Everything

was crumbling. Social order and religious practice had fallen into total disrepair. Morality – and morale – was at an all-time low. If I am honest, I cannot but see a certain parallel with what we are experiencing as Church and society at this time in history. In so many respects, things are in a pitiful state. In a bad way, as we say colloquially. We only have to open our eyes and look around us – both in Church and in society. So much has fallen apart and is still falling apart! So much has crumbled and is still crumbling! We would be foolish indeed to deny this... and yet, just as was in the case in Amos' day, so in our own day and age there are many who prefer to imagine that all is well, or, at least, that things are not as bad as they are made out to be.

In this context, I dare to suggest that we need the kind of challenging words of Amos-like figures to rouse us from our torpor; to shake us (indeed, to shock us) out of the denial in which we are so ready to take false refuge. The prophetic words of Amos were not only incisive – cutting to the heart; heard properly, they were also inspiring – lifting up downcast, downtrodden, people's hearts. Ultimately, they were infused with hope. Genuine hope! Not some sort of wishful thinking, but truly grounded hope in the Lord. If Amos insisted upon the people setting their illusory dreams aside, he also insisted upon them holding trust in God in their hearts. Like all the prophets, Amos insisted upon people's attitude of heart. He wanted to awaken within his listeners what needed to be awoken within them. It is to be hoped that our reading of his words today will have the same effect upon us at this point in time. These are dark days in our world and they are sombre days in the life of the Church. It is hard not to be disheartened. But we must not lose heart! Often it is only by enduring and traversing dark times that we come to experience the healing power of the radiant rays of God's own light. It happens at times that we need shock treatment to bring us into an experience of healing. The shock we endure can serve to awaken us from our false illusions about reality. Sometimes it is only when life has spun out of control and we are about to crash and be plunged into ruination that we are actually led to take things in hand and steer them back (to steer ourselves back!) into the right way. Sometimes it is only when our life circumstances are brought so low and cannot but admit to our weakened state – indeed, our possible perdition – that we come to see our need for God's help to save us from peril and raise us up to the new life He wants to see us enjoy.

In the section from Amos' prophecy read this morning it is interesting to note how this man of God faced up to the challenges set before him and especially how he contended with the predicaments he encountered. It was through one thing alone. It was through unflinching trust in God. The same unflinching trust in God, the same confidence of heart, is to be witnessed in Patrick's life from his conversion onwards. Nothing and no one could turn our national apostle away from fulfilling the mission he felt that Lord calling him to accomplish through the pleading voice of the Irish heard in that dream which bade him to come and walk among them once again. In response to that call Patrick came bringing the light of the Gospel into the Irish people's darkness. Patrick set forth confidently to bring the Good News to this land, formerly the land of his own captivity and near death. He brought the Gospel to his former captives with its promise of freedom and fullness of life.

Just as God called Amos the herdsman and fruit picker to enter into completely new territory in his life, becoming the Lord's own spokesperson – someone who would stand before others to raise their hopes, so Patrick was called to respond courageously to Christ's call to be the Apostle to the Irish. Patrick was to bring to the very people who have robbed him of his freedom, the Good News of liberty for captives, heralded by Jesus in the Synagogue of Nazareth, in echo to the words of Isaiah.

Patrick's God-given mission led him to fulfil one of the great challenges of the Gospel. It led him to live love of one's enemies and to do good to those who have done one wrong. It was to people who had treated him harshly and ill-treated him that Patrick was sent with the gentle, healing message of the Gospel. It was to people who had been responsible for what had been a

nightmare experience in his life in those long days and nights, exposed to the elements on the Hill of Slemish, during his time of slavery, subjected to the brutal treatment of cold-hearted men, that Patrick was sent to proclaim the dawning of a new and glorious day, according to God's dream for the good and well-being of the Irish people who would welcome the warmth of Christ's love into their hearts.

In his Confessio Patrick declares what he felt deep within himself. He tells his readers what he experienced in Ireland through the fulfilment of his mission. Let me quote his own words here: I cannot keep quiet – nor should I – about the tremendous blessings and the graces that the Lord poured out on the land of my captivity. Those words show us that the hardships Patrick had hitherto endured paled into insignificance when he considered the Lord's intervention in his life and all that it led to.

What Patrick experienced was God's strength directing him; God's power sustaining him; God's wisdom guiding him. He came to see with time how the Lord had opened up a pathway before him.

As I say that, I think of those times when we all stand in need of a strength greater than our own to face the challenges set before us in God's service and that of His people. Let me draw this reflection to a close by sharing with you two prayers that have spoken to me a lot during these Lenten days and which I have felt led to make my own as part of my daily Lenten observance. The first is a prayer composed by Saint John XXIII: Every day I need You, Lord, but today especially, I need some extra strength to face whatever is to come. This day, more than any other day, I need to feel You near me to strengthen my courage and to overcome my fear. By myself I cannot meet the challenge of the hour. We are frail human creatures and we need a Higher Power to sustain us in all that life may bring. And so, dear Lord, hold my trembling hand. Be with me, Lord, this day and stretch out Your powerful arm to help me. May Your love be upon me as I place all my hope in You. We would all do well to make that prayer our own as we engage ourselves in the Lord's service and that of our brothers and sisters in the Church – not least when what we are confronted with is nothing short of a daunting challenge. The other prayer which has helped me has a Patrician feel to it. It is reminiscent of Patrick's famous Breastplate. This prayer is a used by the Celtic community of St Hilda and St Aidan at their Eucharistic liturgies. It seems fitting to share it with you here in the context of our Eucharistic celebration. It reads: I rise up clothed in the strength of Christ. I shall not be imprisoned, I shall not be harmed. I shall not be downtrodden, I shall not be left alone. I shall not be tainted, I shall not be overwhelmed. I go clothed in Christ's white garments. I go freed to weave Christ's patterns. I go loved to serve Christ's weak ones. I go armed to rout out Christ's foes. The white garments referred to therein evoke Easter for us. Already during these Lenten days – days of gloom and darkness on the world stage with all that is happening before our eyes in Ukraine, days of discouragement among many in the Church (all the Churches) – let us look to Christ of the Easter morning. As we do so, may hope be renewed in our hearts. May we share that hope among ourselves – and beyond our own little circles of life – at this time when so many are looking for something to hope for. May we present them with someone to hope in: Christ-Jesus our Lord, whom we all have for mission to preach!

Amen!