

March 17-18, 2012

March 17: Saint Patrick's Feast Day

March 18: 4th Sunday of Lent

Saint Patrick's Feast Day

St. Patrick lived: 389-461

Saint Patrick was the first Catholic bishop in the world to condemn slavery! Why? Because in his youth he was one! Kidnapped at age 16 he was transported to Ireland. There in its green hills and glens, he tended sheep and developed a strong love for the fertile earth. After 6 years he escaped and went back to his native land—(England? Or perhaps Normandy?)

On my bookshelf I have a rock that he would have seen when he later returned to Ireland as a bishop and climbed the holy mountain of the Druids that looms over Clew Bay in County Mayo. There he spent a whole season of Lent, preparing to convert the Irish to the Christian faith. Before him the Druids for 4000 years celebrated rites on the mountain now called Croagh Patrick. They too might have seen or tripped over my rock. Why do I have the rock from the Patrick's Holy Mountain? Because on the last Sunday of July, in 1973, with my good friend Larry Dorsey and 50,000 other climbers I climbed to the summit reluctantly. However when dawn peeked over Clew Bay, I was so taken by the sight that I came home and published my first writing: *"The Reluctant Pilgrim."* If I had wimped out on the climb, I probably never would have started to write and the dozen books I have since written would never exist.

Great things happen on mountain tops. Last week, the mountain of Transfiguration, this week, Croagh Patrick and Moses is on Mount Sinai. When Saint Patrick came down from the mountain he successfully traveled throughout Ireland and the Druids were very open to his message. For they already possessed a strong belief in an afterlife. There is a beautiful tale of Saint Patrick meeting two young Irish girls at the Well of Clibach and them quizzing him about this new faith and its hero: Jesus Christ. It is on page 77 of my *Seven Secrets of the Celtic Spirit* book.

The two colleens sat with Patrick at the Holy Well and asked of him:

Who is God?

And where is God?

Of whom is God?

And where is his dwelling?

Has he sons and daughters,
gold and silver,

this God of yours?

Is he ever living,

is he beautiful?

Was his Son

fostered by many?
Are his daughters
fair and beautiful,
to the men of this world?
Is he in heaven,
or on the earth?
In the sea,
in the rivers,
in the mountains,
in the valleys?
Speak to us
Tidings of him:
How will he be seen?
How is he to be loved?
How is he found?
Is it in youth,
or in old age
he is found?

And Patrick answered them, "Yes he is in the rivers and the glens, and yes he is beautiful, and they were amazed and receptive at all Patrick had to tell them of their new hero: Christ. And in his great prayer, Patrick proclaimed:

I arise today
Through strength of heaven:
Light of sun,
Radiance of moon,
Splendor of fire
Speed of lightening
Swiftiness of wind
Depth of sea,
Stability of earth,
Firmness of rock!

Oh yes, perhaps the very rock that sits on my mantle!

My Celtic Prayer Book is dedicated to my friend Larry Dorsey who goaded me into climbing Croagh Patrick in 1973. It reads:

In memory of Father Larry Dorsey,
My Celtic Anam Cara,
September 18, 1933—March 16, St. Patrick's Eve, 1998

“He has climbed Croagh Patrick
And now sees farther than any of us can dream.”

Short Reflection on 4th Sunday of Lent:

Surely the epic story of the Irish in some ways echoes the travails of the Hebrews. In today’s reading, we have the enemies of the Hebrews wreaking havoc on their land and the Hebrew people being exiled into the land of Babylon.

It was so for the Irish who spent 800 years under the yoke of England. And the worst of persecutions took place when Oliver Cromwell raped and pillaged the land. In Northern Ireland the native Irish were driven from their homes and supplanted by Protestant colonists from England. The Irish too went into exile to far away places like Australia and America.

And in today’s Gospel, Jesus gives us the image of Moses and the serpent on the pole, which would become an icon of healing. It presages his own nailing to the cross which would be for our healing. In Ireland, the Celtic cross is always surrounded by a circle. The circle is like the earth, the stars, and the sun. For the Celts, God was deep down and all around. This is what Patrick would tell the girls at the well of Clibach and what he would tell us today as well.

Breakfast Discussion: Why is St. Patrick’s Day so popular?

Personal Reflection: What is most appealing to you about the Patrick Story?