

The Difference of One

Jonathan Gallagher

We know little enough about this man who lived long ago on the fringes of the then known world. Debates continue over his birthplace, ancestry, and mother tongue. Just about every event in his life is in dispute, while some even question whether he ever lived at all.

Yet the impact of Patrick, apostle to the Irish, is without question one of the most momentous in history. Little do we realize...

Without Patrick, without the transformation of the Irish people from warring pagans to warm-hearted literate Christians, without the safeguarding of the best of the past and the delight in God's present, the course of western civilization would have been much different, and even our experience today much the poorer.

Without Patrick, Europe would have been left practically without scholars and books and learning, as the barbarian hordes overcame the anemic remnants of the once mighty Roman Empire. No past treasures from which later there could be a Renaissance. No rich repository of learning to draw upon. No exquisitely beautiful manuscripts that inspires the mind with the illustrations at the same time as the written languages speaks.

Without Patrick, there's even the potential loss of a way of thinking, a theological tradition and a message of faith through the appreciation of beauty and uniqueness that is so much part of the Irish heritage.

For it was the Irish scribes who so carefully transcribed all the books they could lay their hands on, preserving some of the hard-won knowledge of the ages. They were the ones who preserved civilization at its western edge, and added the vital spark of a gospel that was as open, beautiful and free as the Irish landscape. They who, in later times, returned their gifts to a world to the east that had forgotten much and gained little, a betterment in love and trust and grace. All because of Patrick, and what he began.

The difference one person can make.

Often it seems that what we do has little effect. Who am I, this 'measly insignificant worm,' that anyone should be changed by what I do or say? What difference does my life make? What could I ever achieve?

It's easy enough to become defeatist, roll over and go back to sleep, saying "What's the point?"

But Patrick did not.

Yet he more than most had enough reasons to feel disinherited, abandoned and insignificant.

Born into a well-to-do Roman Briton family in a prospering part of the decaying Empire, Patrick had the all the benefits of position and a good early education. His parents surely had a good career mapped out for him, a productive member of society, an honorable man who would become a useful citizen of Rome. And a Christian too, with all that means in terms of assurance in the present and hope for the future.

All that comfortable existence was shattered by the arrival of a band of Irish raiders who kidnapped ten-year-old Patrick and sold him into slavery, to a king ? in the Irish county of Antrim. There he was sent out to the hills to care for cattle, a poor starving herdsman who had to survive the rigors of the cold climate as best he could.

He admits it was appalling. He had no clothes, no food, no shelter. He lived rough in the mountainous country, with only himself for company most of the time. His occasional contact with his oppressors was made the more difficult since he did not understand their language.

The temptation to roll over and die must have come often, far away from those he loved, a stranger living a strange and hard life in a strange land. Yet it was his Christian convictions that sustained him, and led him to a live of service to God instead of slavery to an Irish chieftain.

After several years as shepherd-slave, Patrick was convicted to leave, and following the call, took ship back to his native land. But despite being back with his family, he remembered the needs of those he had met in pagan Ireland. For the gods of the Irish were ugly and terrible, glorying in violence and death and human sacrifice. An appalling litany of evil spoken in the guise of divine truth.

Now neither British or Irish, Patrick chose to leave his family again, this time voluntarily. He took ship back to Ireland, where he shared the gospel to great effect. In a few short years, Irish society was transformed. The old pagan warrior concepts of violent courage, personal honor and ancient myths were replaced by the Christian values of love, grace and truth.

Patrick's Christianity as it developed in Ireland had little of the form developed on the Continent. Much simply did not apply. Ireland had no cities, so the structure was very different. Spreading the word was done by traveling preachers who lived simple lives. Not having the need for the continental system also left these ministers of the gospel free to use the Bible as the basis for instruction, and they preached in the local language. So beliefs such as the seventh-day Sabbath, faith in the resurrection, and hope in second advent all found acceptance in Irish faith. Theirs was a gospel of grace, of freedom, of openness.

For Adventists, there is much to appreciate here. Not only some aspects of doctrinal similarity, but—and perhaps more importantly—the modeling of a ‘system’ that allowed for the primacy of individual faith. What mattered most was not enforced conformity, but a consensus on the basis of truth. In the same way as early Adventists rejected the formulation of a hard-and-fast creed, so too the Celtic Christians promoted a faith that though influenced by some of the Church Fathers was much more inclined to appeal to the Bible as the final authority. After all, they were a long way from any established ecclesiastical authority, and even farther distant in their mindset.

Together with this faith based in the freedom of the individual to choose and believe came a high respect for the all kinds of literature. Within a generation, Irish society changed from almost complete illiteracy to one where many could read and write. Their love for the written word was such that they spent their lives copying the Bible and other precious old books that came into their hands, adding in beautiful illustrations and making translations into Irish.

The change is truly dramatic. From a warrior, violent, illiterate, pagan—one could almost say demonic—society into one in which the gospel of Jesus was the foundation for all life. That’s not to say that the Irish became literal saints overnight—they still resorted to battle when they felt it necessary, and their morals were not all they could be. But understanding the sacrifice of Jesus meant that human sacrifice was gone. Knowing the power of grace and forgiveness meant that violence was not the rule. Recognizing the true God of creation meant the pagan myths could be abandoned.

At Patrick’s insistence (he was a former slave, after all), the slave trade was stopped. Patrick was far ahead of his time, and slavery continued in many societies. His voice was one of the first to repudiate the system—on the basis of the gospel of the free.

Most of all, the love and mutual respect engendered by the gospel meant that society could become supportive and accepting and open and free—so much so that the Irish became the caretakers of western civilization. They accepted as family those fleeing the barbarian invasions. They welcomed all the learning they could find, and could read Greek and Latin, even some Hebrew. And they treasured a faith that found its best expression in the simple words of the Bible.

All because Patrick and his fellow-workers made the choice to share the good-news gospel with these tribes of what they would have called pagan savages. The result: a flowering of a beautiful faith that expressed itself in the exquisite illustration of the Book of Kells, in fine Celtic metalwork, in a society that did its best to promote the good, and to identify with the pursuit of happiness.

That these early Christians did not take themselves so seriously is illustrated in the little scribblings at the edges of the manuscripts they copied. Comments about their love-life. Humorous incidents. A charming tale of one copyist’s pet cat. Theirs was a faith that though not without faults had a great respect for God’s gift of life, a life that was to be lived more abundantly.

And when the time came, they traveled far from their beloved country to share their treasures across Europe, returning the gifts of language and learning, of books and art. Most of all, they shared their enthusiastic, individualistic faith—a faith that allowed them to travel fearlessly in small boats from Ireland to England to continental Europe. A faith that gave the greatest place not to authority or institutions, but to conscience and liberty of the mind. A faith that could even accept the books of the pagan past—the Greek and Roman classics—for what they were, and not try to censor them.

Of course, as history shows, in the eventual confrontation with continental Christianity, the Irish Christians were the losers—at least in terms of organizational structure and their particular formulation of the faith. Yet their freedom of spirit lives on in much of what we value today, especially in the need for an open and free understanding and practice of belief, of a tolerance that is not threatened by difference, of a gospel that is simple and natural and as real as the Creator God of the green fields and blue sky and sea...

The prayer of Patrick, often called his ‘breastplate,’ evokes those distant days and the faith of one man who chose to make his own unique kind of difference. Scholars may argue over exactly when it was set down in writing and how it was transmitted to us. But its emphasis is pure Patrick, the voice of a hopeless slave turned victorious Christian by the power of the gospel. Most significantly, its twin themes are God as Creator and the centrality of Christ.

It reads in part:

*Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.*

A hymn of praise and prayer to the all-encompassing Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, in whom we think and move and have our being. A prayer we can all pray, asking for the indwelling Christ in us, and that his life should shine through us so all who see us, see Christ.

And why? All of Patrick’s achievements come through his clear reliance on God for everything, and the conviction that we do not live in vain, that we each one can make a vital difference.

As the Irish might say it: *The difference of one.*

© Jonathan Gallagher 2000