

**St Patrick's Day 2015
Saul Memorial Church.**

Prayer of Introduction

In his *Confessio* Patrick writes: *The One who gave His life for you, He it is who speaks in you.*
May the Lord be with all of us as we listen to His word as it resonates in our hearts today!

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Homily

A reading of St Patrick's *Confession of Faith* leaves us in no doubt that the great *Apostle to the Irish* regarded himself as one who carried *the precious treasure of the gospel, the light and power that shone within him, in a perishable container.*

He knew that *the glorious power at work within him came not from himself but from God.*
Patrick certainly did not give into the temptation of overestimating himself. He wrote in his *Confessio*:

My name is Patrick. I am a sinner, a simple country person, the least of all believers.

I recognise my failings.

I am imperfect in many ways.

I want my brothers and relations to know what I am really like, so that they can see what it is that inspires my life.

There were surely times when, like the great Saint Paul before him, Patrick found himself *perplexed, not knowing why things happen as they do,* but, just like the Apostle to the Gentiles, he did not give up. He did not quit. He trusted in God who never abandons us.

Patrick's example, rooted in and informed by his meditation upon the Sacred Scriptures, is an encouragement to all of us who are faced with the challenge of preaching the gospel today.

In some places the Christian message is met with a hostile reaction, in other areas (and this is maybe even more challenging) it is met with pure indifference.

Increasingly, the gospel we preach is considered to be nothing other than ridiculous, madness. We are taken to be fools, but *we are fools for Christ's sake.*

How should we respond?

Inspired by insights that come to us from both the writings of Paul and the *Confessio* of Patrick, I dare to say (and this may surprise some) our response should be one of gentle humility, grounded in the acceptance of a certain *powerlessness.*

While we might be tempted to fight to retain a privileged place, the call addressed to us by Jesus is to stand in the ranks of those without privilege

I believe that we are being brought to the very heart of the paradox of the gospel and the whole of the Christian message at this moment: the paradox of powerlessness!

God's strength shines forth best in human weakness.

From what we read in Patrick's *Confessio*, this affirmation of Paul was also the experience of Saint Patrick, patron of Ireland.

As Christians, called to live lives configured to Christ, we can dare to take a stance of humble powerlessness, not because we find ourselves forced into this position through our loss of status in society, but by choice, out of fidelity to the example of Christ and in response to the call of His gospel.

Our Master, the One we follow, came as a humble servant. Christ did not come to *lord it over*

others. He assumed the condition of a slave, making Himself the least and the last of all.

The powerlessness advocated here may frighten some of us and make us feel uncomfortable, By and large, we don't like to find ourselves in a vulnerable, poor and fragile position. We much prefer to be in charge, in control.

There are those who would argue that we should be able to influence things from a place of social privilege.

The advantage of a position of powerlessness and weakness is that it leads us to depend entirely upon the power and strength of God at work within us. It moves beyond the self-reliance born of pride.

When the Church forgets that it was in powerlessness and humility that Jesus revealed Himself, it is easier to abuse power and privilege. This is detrimental to its mission. It discredits the gospel and the Christ it is called to preach to the world.

Jesus who came into this world as a helpless infant also took leave of it in a state of earthly powerlessness.

It is as One stripped of power that we shall contemplate Him in our celebration of the paschal mystery in the coming Easter days.

Jesus' triumph of resurrection first had Him headed to the cross, abandoned, humiliated, mocked, derided and rejected by all.

How is it that we struggle to get our heads around Paul's teaching and Patrick's example that Christ's *grace is sufficient for us, for His power is made perfect in weakness?*

Strangely, as Christians and as Churches, once we recognise the paradox of powerlessness, this can be quite a relief to us.

We come to see that we do not always have to be strong or hold first place or pretend to be perfect. We can live our real lives with their daily struggles. We can accept that we are bodily creatures beset with weakness and still find the power to keep going without being crushed and broken.

It is important for us to be reminded of this when, even in Church circles, so many talk about growth and development being dependent upon the employment of powerful means of communication, rather than an approach which echoes and mirrors the humble powerlessness of Jesus Christ.

The rich harvest of which our gospel speaks will always be the result of humble sowing of small, fragile seeds. These will be brought to fruition by the gentle attention of God's grace rather than by forced growth methods.

Patrick grasped this. His mission to the Irish began so humbly here at Saul.

The site of the celebration of the first Eucharist on Irish soil was a barn, a humble stable.

This reflected the humility of our God who revealed Himself in Jesus-Christ born in a similar setting in Bethlehem.

The Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper came at a moment of powerlessness in Jesus' life. He left us this memorial on the eve of His passion and death, events which made it look as if His earthly ministry ended in failure.

The Dominican spiritual writer and theologian Timothy Radcliffe has written: *The Church began at a moment of utter collapse.*

This statement gives me hope for the Church of our day. I conclude from it that we have nothing to fear from the increasing powerlessness we are experiencing at this time.

The Church, which was born in weakness, is renewed through crises. Her growth in the likeness of the humble Christ comes most often through an experience and acceptance of humiliation.

The challenge with which we are confronted today is how to announce the gospel in a society that ignores Christ.

I draw inspiration from the insight of the great Orthodox spiritual teacher Metropolitan Anthony who once said: *It seems to me, and I am deeply convinced of this, the Church should never speak from a position of power.* He went on: *[The Church] should be, if you will, as powerless as God who does not use force, Who only beckons us, opening up the beauty and truth of things.*

Patrick clearly grasped this. He did not come to our land imposing the gospel by force, but rather proposing its beautiful, life-giving message by truthful, honest persuasion and by his own humble demeanour. As theologian Elizabeth Johnston so aptly said in his praise at Maynooth a few days ago: *He was saturate in Godliness!*

There is an incident depicted on the stained glass window of this little church which is worth recalling in the light of today's gospel passage which speaks of the harvest.

The window depicts the first paschal fire lit on the Hill of Slane.

The High King of all Ireland had gathered together with the regional kings, their druids, shamans, bards and advisers on the nearby Hill of Tara to light the new fire at the Spring solstice. It was the king's privilege, and this ritual had for aim to invoke the Sun to shower beneficently upon them and their crops in the coming season.

On the hill opposite, at Slane, Patrick lit his Easter fire celebrating the light of Christ's resurrection. Challenged by the High King's forces for this act, considered to be a blatant defiance, Patrick was totally disarming in his response to the aggressive, enraged forces who came at him. We are told that he addressed those who came at him in power and might, using simply these scriptural words of confidence in God: *While some trust in chariots and horses, we trust in the Lord our God.*

The power we need as Church today is none other than that of the powerless Christ.

When confronted by the hostility of the world we should meet those who assail us with nothing other than a firm expression of our confidence and trust in the Lord, relying on the power of His word.

It is the light of Christ, the fire of His resurrection, and not any forceful power we might want to deploy that will ripen the harvest which we see all around us and which is waiting to be gathered in love into Christ's kingdom.

Amen!

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