

The Life of the Church

Learning our Church History

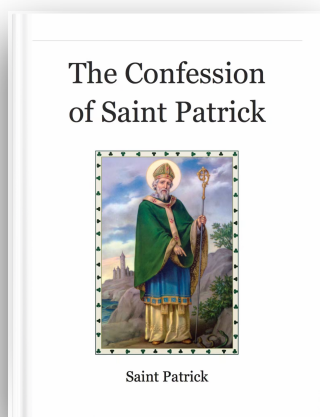
Part 6 - Patrick, The Apostle of Ulster

The Beginnings of Patrick

Lift any book on church history and Patrick will always be mentioned. But this is not how the world gains its understanding of Ireland's patron saint. It is quite ironic that the first St. Patrick's Day parades happened in North America and not in Ireland around the start of the 1600s. There is a lot about Patrick that people have assimilated and assumed to be truth and identified with, all of which are not true. As we take a look we won't see him as being Protestant or Roman Catholic, and certainly not someone to be claimed by one community only, or indeed even one denomination. By seeing a servant of God, whom God used in this province, we today continue to know this salvation message that Patrick brought to this Island.



So what do we know about Patrick? It turns out we don't know a lot, but what we do know comes from the man himself. There are really two pieces of work that let us know about Patrick. One is simply called *The Letter*, in which Patrick writes and talks about a dispute that he tries to sort out. The second and more important document that we know about is called *The Confession of St. Patrick*. The original copy of this is held in Trinity College, Dublin and is part of a collection of work in the *Book of Armagh*. The *Book of Armagh*, which was written 400 years after Patrick, has the full 14 pages of The Confession. His confession is not an opening up about all his sins. His confession, as the word would have meant in older times, simply what he believed. He confessed. This is something the early church did, they confessed their faith in Christ, much like we have the Westminster Confession of Faith.



This is the earliest copy we have, but we believe there is an earlier copy and we believe it is true that it is written by Patrick because of the language that he uses. The language is that of what would have been used in the mid 400s. This assures us of its accuracy and relevance. The Confession tells us where he was from, what he believes and his approach to mission. It turns out that Patrick was actually more Presbyterian than what we might think. Patrick came to Ireland and learned the local language; he got to know the people; he used things around him to point people to Jesus, images of the surrounding areas so that people would understand and know God and his salvation.

This was much like what early Presbyterians did in the Reformation and with John Knox in Scotland. We were people who had to meet on hillsides; we were people who had to meet under trees because we were not allowed to have our own property or buildings and we were officially not allowed to gather. Much like Patrick, our Presbyterian forefathers wandered and taught and used what they had around them to explain truths about scripture.

The church in Patrick's time, having been established in the late third century, was a worshipping community of God, coming under his word. In what Patrick writes it seems to be a very reformed approach to Scripture.

Patrick was born around A.D.385 and was a Roman citizen. He lived in Roman Britain. Therefore, he has many parallels and similarities to the Apostle Paul, and just like Paul he was entitled to everything of the empire. We are familiar with Hadrian's Wall being the physical wall that marked the extent of the Roman Empire. After Hadrian died his adopted son came and expanded the empire further than Hadrian's Wall. The land into which Patrick was born was very much a Roman world. It is the opening paragraph of *The Confession* that tells us of his early beginnings.

I, Patrick, a sinner, a most simple countryman, the least of all the faithful and most contemptible to many, had for father the deacon Calpornius, son of the late Potitus, a priest, of the settlement [vicus] of Bannavem Taburniae; he had a small villa nearby where I was taken captive. I was at that time about sixteen years of age. I did not, indeed, know the true God.



We don't know where Banevim Taburnai was, but best guesses tell us it was in what is now souther Scotland. His father a deacon, but his grandfather, Potitus, was a priest. From what we know Patrick is now the third generation of Christian believers. This should be no surprise to use considering what we looked at last week and the Emperor Constantine making Christianity an official religion in the empire. This includes as far as Hadrian's Wall and at the time of Patrick a little bit further north, and into Ireland.

We now believe that Patrick was born somewhere close the Antonine Wall. Antonine, the adopted son of Hadrian managed to push further north and build another wall from modern day Edinburgh to Glasgow. It is somewhere just south of this wall that we believe Patrick was born.

Being Roman and having a father involved in religious leadership meant that they were a family of standing and as such had a Roman villa. This was a homestead for not only daily living, but also to host gatherings, either for worship or for social concerns of the community.

Slave in Ireland

Patrick was taken from his home at the age of 16. Marauding Irish came across the Irish Sea and took captive not only Patrick, but as Patrick says in his confession, thousands of people and brought them across as slaves to Ireland. At this young age Patrick was sold as a slave to a man near Slemish called Milcu. Patrick worked for six years on the lonely mountainside looking after sheep. But it was during these six years that Patrick tells us in his confession that it was at Slemish he came to know the true living God. Christianity had already been in Ireland by this stage but it was still very much a place of Druid and animist religion; it was natural in terms of looking to nature for religious practices. The Druids were not only just religious leaders but they were community leaders. For Patrick, there was no evangelist to teach him and encourage him. He had known from his father the deacon and his grandfather the priest, about the true God and it was in dreams and visions and in a burning heart that God used to bring Patrick to conversion and to living faith in Jesus Christ.



One night a vision came to him and it was a vision of a port. The vision led him to travel, so he would get up, and he went straight to that port, however long it would take him to travel, south of Dublin, and he would sail from there across to Wales and get home again.

When he got home, in the confession he says that his parents said to him that he was never to leave them again. And Patrick agreed. But Patrick had another vision calling him back to Ireland. At 22 years of age Patrick was called to bring the gospel to Ireland. There are a few inaccuracies that are common about this part of his life. What we know,

- Patrick did not go to Rome for his training.
- Patrick was not blessed by the Pope (Leo I) to come to Ireland.
- Patrick did not wear the robes of a priest.

Mission to Ireland



Germanus of Auxerre

Patrick did travel to France to meet with bishop of Auxerre, called Germanus. He left high government office to go into the church. Patrick spent about 30 years with Germanus and after that time he sailed from France to Ireland. His mission focus this time was very much in Ulster.

Returning to Ireland via Strangford Lough, he travels 2 miles and comes to Saul. But it is Armagh that gives us the legacy of Patrick. From 300B.C. Armagh was the seat of the High Kings of Ulster and it was a place of pagan worship. The city is built on seven drumlins. One drumlin is the site of Navan Fort, the centre of pagan worship and so it was to the drumlin that is now the city centre than Patrick developed a centre of teaching and learning. Today is it the site of Saint Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral. Patrick is now about 60 years of age and by the time the structure of the church and worship is complete, he is 64 years old. He establishes a monastery, where people can copy the Bible and a library is established to retain the truth of the Christian faith. Patrick also gives us what are traditionally called the High Crosses of Ireland. Not only did it mark the area as a Christian area, but it also drew people to that point for teaching. Each side of the cross would have images of the Biblical story on them.

Patrick continues to work and teach in Ulster to the age of 76, on 17 March. Traditionally he dies at Saul but claims are made by Saul, Downpatrick and Armagh that Patrick is buried there. But Patrick's legacy following his death was the monastic settlements that grew, not just in Armagh, but throughout the Island as patrician missionaries went far and wide. These monasteries grew around the newly planted churches so the influence of Druid religion would eventually die out in Ireland.



Before we conclude, we need to challenge some myths that have arisen about Patrick and his position in the church.

- Patrick was not canonised by the Roman Catholic Church.
- Patrick did not use the shamrock to explain the Trinity.
- There were no snakes in Ireland for Patrick to drive out.

Read: 1 Timothy 1: 12-17

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

1 Timothy 1:15

We learn three things about Patrick that are of benefit for us today:

- Patrick knew his position before God.
- Patrick proclaimed the true gospel and people came to faith (Apostle of Ulster).
- Patrick was content in the Lord's service.

The legacy of Patrick continues to this day. In the Dark Ages in mainland Europe churches were burned and manuscripts destroyed. It was here in Ireland that when the Dark Ages were over that the Gospel went forth, and churches were planted again throughout Europe, leading, of course, to the Reformation, which came back to this land and the heritage in which we now live. Because of the monastic tradition started by Patrick the great repository of Christian faith was accessible for missionaries to go out and proclaim the truth once again.



Questions to Discuss

1. What have you learned about Patrick this evening that is new or challenges what you thought you knew?
2. How can the example of Patrick influence our proclamation of the gospel today?
3. Are you content in your service of the Lord today? Why or why not?

Resources for this teaching series are available at www.annalongpc.org/midweek