

5th Sunday in Lent
March 17, 2024

Jer. 31:31-34; Ps. 119:9-16; Heb. 5:1-10
Mark 10:32-45

“But it shall not be so among you...”Mark 10:43

Saint Patrick’s Day always falls somewhere in the Lenten season and even for Christians who take the Lenten season as a serious spiritual endeavor, often this day is seen as a “break” from the rigors of the Lenten fast. Just to review for a minute the history of this religious holy day which has been usurped by the green beer drinkers of the world: There was a real Saint named Patrick whose work of bringing the gospel to the largely pagan land of Ireland back in the 5th century was momentous. Patrick was captured along with many others from his home in England by Irish raiders and at the age of 16 he was made a slave, tending sheep in an extremely isolated area of Ireland. For six years he lived in a state of misery. Lonely and mistreated he prayed night and day for God’s intervention in his life. You see Patrick was a lapsed Christian prior to his captivity. Like many young people today, he had neglected his faith but those tough years alone with the sheep brought him to a spiritual awakening. One day after many years of prayer he heard a voice from God telling him that a ship was waiting for him to return him to his homeland and so he escaped his captivity walking two hundred miles to the sea where indeed he was able to board a boat back to England. But of course the story doesn’t end there because what happened next is why Patrick is remembered to this day – again he hears a message from God to return to Ireland, the place where he was a slave, now to confront the false worship of the people of Ireland and to bring them to faith in the one true God. And so for 30 years against much opposition he worked among the people of that largely pagan land baptizing over 120,000 people and starting 300 hundred churches. And so yes, there is a real reason to celebrate the work of Saint Patrick. Unfortunately too many of the modern day celebrations are of the godless nature that Patrick worked so hard to convert.

Rather than a disruption to the Lenten season, I think the story of Saint Patrick ties in really well with our lessons for today. And I think his life brings up a very interesting question for us in our spiritual journeys... Are times of trial really a blessing from God? Now hold on to that question for a moment. I’m not asking if God can turn times of trial into a blessing. The answer to that question is pretty easy – yes, we’ve probably all seen God at work in a time of trial, making an unbearable situation bearable. But my question is a little deeper. Is the time of trial actually a blessing? Does suffering bring an actual benefit to our lives?

I’m asking that question because we see in the gospel lesson a great example of the way Jesus turns our world upside down. We spend a lot of time avoiding suffering – have a headache, take a pill. Have a backache, lay down and rest... Of course, it’s only natural. But Jesus chose suffering for the sake of the world – he took on our pain and our sin and went to the cross. Now that just doesn’t seem normal at face value. However this was not suffering just for the sake of suffering; this was redemptive suffering – this was a life turned inside out. Jesus wasn’t thinking of himself. Instead he was seeking the will of the Father and working for the salvation of the whole world. And because of his inverted attitude our way of looking at the world is also reversed. That’s what he’s trying to get through to the disciples when he tells them: Whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

This only makes sense if we realize that for Christians there is a different understanding of greatness. The world is constantly holding up for our admiration people who are great at sports or acting, people who have made a great deal of money or who have a great deal of power. But God’s greatness is seen in

his abundant mercy, in his generous forgiveness, and his amazing love. Patrick learned of this mercy and forgiveness as he prayed and contemplated in his lonely shepherd outpost. God showed him how his previous life lived apart from faith in Jesus was meaningless and vain. Patrick was taken and made a slave by his Irish captors. He was a slave not by choice but eventually he became a slave by choice, a slave or servant for Christ. Following Jesus he went into hostile territory to share the Good News. I invite you to read St. Patrick's Breastplate. It is hymn #188 in the green hymnal, *I Bind Unto Myself Today*. In the small print you see it is attributed to St. Patrick, which means it may not have been written by Saint Patrick but it expresses closely his theology. If you examine the text you see that he bound himself to the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Being bound to Christ is interesting imagery – is it like being tied together for a three legged race or being bound like a slave to their master, following behind. For Lent, my husband and I are reading the book *Joining Jesus in His Mission*. The whole thrust of the book is that Jesus is already at work in our world and we just need to open our eyes to what he is doing and not stand in his way but rather to be his assistants so to speak. With this perspective, we are not in the driver's seat. We are not bringing Jesus into our lives as a kind of self-improvement plan, rather as his baptized people, Jesus has opened the door for us to be a part of his life and mission. I am not making room for him in my schedule. Rather he is inviting me to let his work and his love transform who I am and where I am going.

I'm always amazed at the number of "special" days that my grandchildren have at school. There's pajama day, which goes against my upbringing, the idea of wearing your pajamas in public, but there's also spirit day where you wear sports attire and Wacky Wednesday where you wear two different socks or you shirt on backwards.

Well, as much as those days get under my skin a bit, I actually think we could call today backwards day, or upside down day. Jesus is messing with our sense of entitlement. He is reminding us that the model he has set before us is a life where thinking of self takes a back seat to thinking of others. Saint Paul in the letter to the Corinthians gives the example of eating food offered to idols. (Read I Corinthians 10:23-33)

Now we can't all be Saint Paul's or Saint Patrick's. Most of us will not have a calling that dramatic. But we do often find ourselves in hostile territory as the world around us gets farther and farther off track. And we do often have times of personal trial when we feel as alone as Patrick did in his shepherding or as frustrated with the people around us as St. Paul was and then we have to do as these Saints before us did. We need to pray and we need to see how God is working in the midst of our suffering and indeed as hard as it may seem, to see how God is calling us to use that suffering to be a blessing to others.

This doesn't mean that it's all work and no play. Rather it means that we don't just have to seek joy in times of play - that there is great joy in simply knowing that we are loved by God and in sharing that love with others, both through acts of service and times of simple hospitality, friendship, and forgiveness joy abounds. So we celebrate Saint Patrick, hopefully not with over indulgence but with great thanksgiving to God for all the saints, who from their labors rest whose witness spurs us on to love and deeds of service for the sake of the one who offered his life for the salvation of the whole world. Amen.