



Patrick: the Slave Returns

Kevin Hargaden, Director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, reflects on the seldom-recognised profundity of the historical life of St Patrick.

One of my favourite jokes ever goes like this: 'What did St Patrick say when he was driving the snakes out of Ireland?' 'Are yiz alright there in the back, lads?'

There are many myths about the patron saint of our land. But few people recognise that Patrick is well-attested historically. In fact, his writings are some of the oldest and most valuable sources of information about Ireland at that time.

We discover a lot about Patrick in a sort of autobiography he calls his *Confessio* and a letter to the soldiers loyal to a tribal leader, Coroticus.

In his *Confessio* we learn that Patrick is, in fact, a Briton. He was born to a wealthy Roman family, probably in Northamptonshire. At sixteen, he was kidnapped by slave traders who took him to Ireland where he was put to work tending sheep. On the hills, he found his faith and he says 'more and more the love of God increased and my sense of awe before God'. He escaped, he claims, because of a divine vision telling him 'Your ship is



After his arrival on Slemish Mountain, Patrick worked under local chieftain Milchu as a shepherd for six years.

ready' that then guided him on the 200-mile journey where he found the ship was manned by pagans, who welcomed him and took him home.

Returned to the tranquillity of life with his family, Patrick's life was turned upside down again by a vision. A man named Victoricus appeared to him in a dream, bearing 'so many letters they could not be counted'. Each letter pleaded for someone to come tell them of the God who is real. Patrick returned to the people who had enslaved him, bearing with him the message of God's liberation.

The second, lesser-read document from Patrick is the *Letter to Coroticus*'



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soldiers. He writes the words with his own hands as it was too important to delegate to an assistant. Patrick had shared the Gospel with a group of Irish people. They had been confirmed in the faith. But the very next day, the soldiers of Coroticus attacked them – while they were still in their baptismal robes – killing many and enslaving the rest.

Patrick intervened immediately. He

dispatched his best priests to retrieve those who could still be saved, but they were laughed out of it by the bandits. Patrick responds by declaring these soldiers to be outcasts. He calls on all righteous people to isolate and alienate the slave traders. Don't eat with them or trade with them or have anything to do with them until 'they do penances so harsh that their tears pour out to God'.

There are many myths about our patron saint. But the historical record contains wisdom that we desperately need. Patrick is clear throughout all his writing that he is a man sent to love his enemies. This is the liberating message of the Gospel!

By nature, all of us struggle to have the strength to forgive those who have harmed us. But when we draw on the endless love of God, we can reach out to anyone, even to those who have caused us heartache and trauma.

But I think there is something even more potent in Patrick's response to the slave-trading soldiers. Everything he does is directed towards the hope that the evil-doers would change. He

sent priests to plead with them. He calls on their friends to teach them by example. He writes this letter to leave them in no doubt: God will judge *and* God will forgive. His final words are full of hope and love for murderers and slavers: 'May God inspire these men sometime to come to their senses;'.
While the myths about Patrick are great fun and the jokes can be funny, the historical fact that Ireland's great figurehead is a Briton whom we enslaved – this is profound. That this slave came to liberate his slavers – this is profound. And that all through his life he insisted that God's justice is mercy – this is a profound fact that can change our lives. ❤️

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