

Sermon, March 17, 2024
Matthew 26:6-13

“The Poor Will Always Be With You”

Today, obviously, is St. Patrick’s Day, a day in which millions gather for parades, and parties filled with great food and drink - a celebration of Ireland, its culture, its history, and its people.

Having been raised in a neighborhood that was predominantly Irish and Italian, I have great memories of past celebrations. These are all good, but sometimes I think the one thing that gets lost in it all is the person for whom the day is named and honored - St. Patrick.

Many are aware of the legends that surround him, such as the story of him chasing all snakes off the island. (Actually, as the story goes, he chased the snakes into a lake where they all turned into eels.) But what of the true stories of his life?

Patrick was actually not Irish. He was born into a wealthy family in Britain, but when he was fifteen, he was kidnapped by Irish slavers and carried off to Ireland’s west coast. There he would remain a slave for six years. During that time, he made the decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ. Later he would write, “...the Lord opened my senses to my unbelief, so that, though late in the day, I might remember my many sins; and accordingly, ‘I might turn to the Lord my God with all my heart’”. He spent so much time in prayer that the other slaves began to refer to him as “holy boy”. One day, while in prayer, he heard a voice saying that he would soon be going home. Then, a while later, another voice told him that his ship was ready. He managed to escape and trekked about 250 miles to the eastern shore, where, after some haggling, he managed to find passage on a ship that would bring him back to England and his family.

Over the next 30 years he would study for the priesthood, be ordained, and eventually made a bishop. Then, one night, he had a dream that a man brought him a letter with the words, “The Voice of the Irish”. As he read, he believed he heard the voice of the same slaves he had worked with, saying, “Holy brother of a boy, we beg you come back and walk once more among us.” Friends and family tried to dissuade him from going, but he chose to return knowing that he could easily be taken back into slavery, or even killed. Yet, he believed he was being called to spread the Gospel among the very people who had enslaved him.

There were already small pockets of Christians throughout the Emerald Isle, but he traveled extensively, preaching to whoever would listen, establishing new churches throughout. It is this evangelical mission for which he is best known, but throughout he “ became known for his service to others. He dedicated his life to helping those in need and was known for his commitment to helping the poor and the marginalized”.

In our reading this morning, Jesus is in the house of a man known as Simon the leper in the village of Bethany, when a woman enter with an alabaster jar filled expensive oil and pours it on Jesus' head. The disciples were greatly angered by this, and complained that the oil could have been sold, and the money given to the poor. Jesus rebuked them, saying, “ Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me”. Jesus knows that he will soon be arrested and put to death, and the woman has essentially prepared him for burial. But the statement that I want to focus on is his saying, “you always have the poor with you”. What is unfortunate about this is that many have interpreted this as meaning that aiding the poor is really not a Christian concern. Nothing could be further from the truth! Patrick certainly understood that care for the poor is a central concern which Jesus calls us to, as did another great patron of the Irish - St. Brigid of Kildare.

It does not take a very deep reading of the Gospels to see Jesus' great concern and care for the poor and those pushed aside in society. As he said in the synagogue in Nazareth, “ The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to let the oppressed go free. , to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” As the Body of Christ in the world we are called to follow his lead.

This is certainly a time for people of goodwill to respond to the call. In 2015 the United Nations put forth 17 Sustainable Development Goals for the world, the first two being an end to global poverty and hunger. Through the efforts of many nations great progress was being made - but then - the pandemic hit resulting in another 70 million people worldwide being plunged into extreme poverty. And right now, many developed nations and people of faith need to respond to the crisis in Gaza, where thousands are on the verge of famine, if they are not already there. The Irish, of course, know well the devastating effects of famine, remembering the Great Hunger of 1845 to 1849 when a million people died of starvation, and another two million emigrated to the US, Canada, and Australia.

We, of course, can continue to support and contribute to the Neighborhood Center, giving aid to the homeless and hungry in our own neck of the woods.

Before I conclude, let me draw your attention to another statement Jesus made in reference to the woman who anointed him with the oil. He said, "Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her".

The strange thing about that is that nowhere is the woman's name mentioned. How can we then respond in remembrance of her? Well, her anonymity turns the call to us - that we are called to serve him in large part by proclaiming the good news, remembering that a big part of that good news is directed towards the poor, the blind, and the oppressed. Amen.

Let us pray: O God who brought us from the rest of last night to the new light of this day. Bring us in the new light of this day to the guiding light of the eternal. As we honor St. Patrick on this day, Lead us, O God, on the journey of justice. Guide us, O God, on the pathways of peace. Grant us the courage and the faith to follow the lead of your Son Jesus in all that we say and do. May your grace and your love find a place in our hearts. Amen.

Benediction: May God give you...

For every storm, a rainbow,

For every tear, a smile,

for every care a promise,

And a blessing in each trial.

For every problem life sends,

A faithful friend to share,

For every sigh, a sweet song,

And an answer for each prayer.

And the blessings of God - Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, be with now and always. Amen.