

Feast of St. Patrick
 March 17, 2020
 “Inspired and Grounded”

How appropriate it is that as we begin a Lenten Fast we could never have imagined; that is a fast from the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, that we have a Saint like Patrick to inspire us and a text from Daniel chapter 3 to ground us.

All of us our feeling shaken today in a way that brings home the unprecedented experience of COVID19. Although a crisis of this magnitude is new to us, when we remember that we are part of a tradition that reaches all the way back into ancient Judaism and culminates in the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension of Jesus Christ and His sending of the Holy Spirit, we can affirm we are not alone. Although we haven't been here before, the Church has.

Today's Saint and Old Testament reading remind us that at a time when anxiety ways heavy on our minds and hearts we can pray with David in today's appointed psalm:

*⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
 for you are the God of my salvation;
 for you I wait all day long.*

Here is a verse that affirms the centrality of the Church's confidence in God's saving work. A work that requires our willingness to be led by his truth and so be taught the deeper meaning of our Catholic faith while at the same time having the patience to wait for God. St Patrick can inspire us because he knew what it meant to wait on God, not just for a day, but for years.

He was Roman Briton, born in the early fifth century. While still a young man, Patrick was kidnapped by raiders and brought to Ireland, where he lived the brutal life of a slave. One can only imagine the darkness of these years: torn away from family, friends, and home, compelled to learn an unfamiliar language, treated with disdain, forced to do the most disagreeable work. How often he must have wept. How often he must have cried out to God, wondering how he could have been so thoroughly abandoned. After six years in Ireland, Patrick finally managed to escape and return home. Some accounts have it that he then sojourned in France, doing his theological studies there and becoming ordained as a priest.

Looking at this life from a purely natural or psychological perspective, one would readily conclude that still youthful Fr. Patrick would never want to journey again to the place where his life had hit rock bottom. Or perhaps, he would want to return there as chaplain to an invading army! Instead, he decided to go back to Ireland in order to carry the Gospel to those who had enslaved and persecuted him. How can we explain this? We have to move beyond a merely natural and psychological framework and understand his life theologically. Stated differently, we have to appreciate that Patrick, like all of the saints, saw his life as ingredient in a drama that God was directing and producing. He appreciated that the whole awful experience of being a slave was not simply dumb suffering, but was, strangely, a preparation for the work that God had for him. Bishop Robert Barron has commented: “During those terrible years, Patrick learned a great deal about the history, topography, and language of the Irish; he came, perhaps, to love

some of their lore and religious customs. Like Moses among the Egyptians, he came to understand the “enemy” culture from the inside and hence was able, with special skill and creativity, to engage it.”¹

Wow, talk about waiting on God. His was a mind and heart you see that was not defined primarily by his circumstances but by his grounding in the Catholic Tradition that takes the Bible as the organizing centre of our lives

This is where today’s first reading comes into focus in a way that is so timely, a text that is some 2300 years-old speaks with a clarity that can really ground us. This passage is set when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are in Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace. Abednego’s other name is Azariah, who according to our first reading stood still in the fire and prayed aloud.

This is what you and I are invited today during this pandemic. Stand still and pray. And what does Azariah pray, that he belongs to a great family with ancestral names like Abraham, Isaac and Israel and that they can continue to participate in the family story even though they are in a fiery Babylonian furnace. Now listen closely to this part of the prayer:

***In our day we have no burnt offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense,
no place to make an offering before you and to find mercy.***

Azariah, is referring here to the Temple Sacrifice in Jerusalem. As he offers these words he is hundreds of kilometers from the Temple. Can there be words more appropriate for today, words that can truly ground us? Although we have never before been asked to offer a Eucharistic Fast, here our ancestors in the faith had to do that very thing. And what did this inspire in Azariah as he concludes his prayer? A deepening trust in God and deepening devotion.

***⁴¹And now with all our heart we follow you;
we fear you and seek your presence.***

***⁴²Do not put us to shame,
but deal with us in your patience
and in your abundant mercy.***

***⁴³Deliver us in accordance with your marvelous works,
and bring glory to your name, O Lord.***

This is a prayer for our time that can ground us as we allow the Lord to lead us and teach us his truth. Something Bishop McGrattan stated so clearly in his letter to the Faithful that we received yesterday.

***As the Diocese of Calgary begins its spiritual renewal, I pray that we realize, with all humility,
our need for the Lord in the Eucharist and our deep spiritual longing for Him. May this
difficult time of fasting from the celebration of the Eucharist deepen our Lenten observance of***

¹ <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/article/st-patrick-st-joseph-and-the-conversion-that-makes-all-the-difference/5423/>

*prayer and solidarity with those who suffer and provide for us the necessary grace of growing
in our missionary discipleship.*

St Patrick pray for us that we may be inspired by your example and grounded by Azariah's prayer in Daniel chapter 3.