

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 1st Sunday of Lent; St. Patrick Parade

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St. Patrick Parade

Basilica of the Assumption

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Introduction

Many legends surround the life of St. Patrick, but the reality of his life is a lot closer to the Gospel just proclaimed, a Gospel which recounts the temptations Jesus suffered in the desert. For a few moments, let us look more closely at today's Gospel so that we may see what light it sheds on St. Patrick's life, and even on our own. But to understand the temptations of Jesus in the desert more completely, we need to back up and begin with Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. Let's go there now.

In order to bury our sins in the waters of Baptism, Jesus, the sinless Lamb of God, was submerged in the waters of the Jordan. From those waters, God's well-beloved Son came forth, just as long ago the Israelites had passed through the waters of the Red Sea. And just as the Israelites were led through the sea into the desert where they wandered for forty years, so too Jesus, after his Baptism, was led into the desert where he fasted and prayed for forty days. In the desert Jesus was tempted by the devil with the same failures that had bedeviled the people of Israel in their desert wanderings : the temptation to give in to their cravings not only for bread but for other forms of physical and material satisfaction; the temptation to forget the God who saved them and to do so by worshipping idols; the temptation to test God, to see if God really were their deliverer.

But in tempting Jesus, Satan did not merely aim to have him fall for the same sins that humanity so often falls for, namely, materialism, power, and presumption. No, Satan's goal was more pernicious; his goal was to convince Jesus to deny his identity as God's Son and to forsake his mission as our Savior. In prevailing over Satan, Jesus remained true to himself and to his mission while opening the way for us to

“renounce sin and all its empty promises”.

How This Applies to St. Patrick

What then, you may be asking, does any of this have to do with St. Patrick? Actually, it's not too hard to see the connection if we recall the basic outline of his life. Born into a prominent 4th century Christian family in Great Britain Patrick, at age fifteen, was captured by Irish pirates and imprisoned in Ireland. That prison was for St. Patrick what the desert was for Jesus. As St. Patrick says of himself in his Confessions, although he was baptized, he was neither well-educated nor well-formed in the faith. But while in prison, he began to take his faith seriously and he began to ask what mission God had in mind for him. And in the process of becoming a true follower of Jesus, St. Patrick wrestled with the same temptations Jesus overcame: the temptation to materialism, power, and presumption. In God's grace Patrick overcame such temptations and his soul was purified.

In 408, Patrick escaped from his captors and returned to his native land. There his God-given vocation solidified. In spite of the ill-treatment he had received in the Irish prison, Patrick resolved to return to Ireland – not as a tourist or a resident — but rather as a missionary, first becoming a priest and later a bishop.

By all accounts, Patrick took Ireland by storm. He quickly demonstrated his love for the Irish people and became one of them. And while we love the stories about his use of shamrocks to explain the Trinity and his power to drive snakes from the Erin's shores, in truth St. Patrick set about preaching the Gospel much as the Lord himself had done. Having taken his own Baptism seriously and having overcome temptation, St. Patrick proclaimed to the people of Ireland, “Repent and believe in the Gospel!” As a true spiritual father, St. Patrick warned the people against the wiles of Satan and helped them overcome the same temptations that afflict all of us: the temptation to satisfy our cravings, the desire to dominate others, the temptation to test God or to make ourselves God's equal. From the highest echelons to the humblest, the people of Ireland took to heart Patrick's preaching. Before long the whole Island was converted to Christ and to the Catholic faith.

The Goal of All Preaching

Let us now follow up on what happened in Jesus' life and in St. Patrick's life. Shortly after Jesus dismissed the devil, he began to preach the Gospel. Soon, he was in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth proclaiming, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; he sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor." Though Jesus was himself poor and powerless - at least in any earthly sense - he went from place to place proclaiming the repentance of sins and the coming of God's Kingdom, that is, the salvation for which humanity longs. This was the goal of Jesus' preaching: that the multitudes he fed, the countless people he healed, and those he amazed by the authority of his preaching, would believe in him and would be baptized into his saving death and resurrection, thus becoming his disciples and friends. This is also what St. Paul speaks of into today's reading from his Letter to the Romans. St. Paul is teaching the Church at Rome that the Gospel message is not out of reach. It is right before us and it is for us to open our hearts to it. So, St. Paul is calling the Church at Rome to a wholehearted conversion of their lives and to the profession of faith in Christ Jesus as Lord - so that many would be baptized and that all would live out their baptismal calling to faith and holiness.

St. Patrick followed in the Lord's footsteps and heeded St. Paul's message as he went about Ireland preaching the Gospel to rich and poor alike. His goal was not merely to give them information or a philosophy of life or to bring them a veneer of Christian civilization or simply to create a legend. No, his goal was that they would be converted from their sins, believe wholeheartedly in Jesus Christ, and share in his saving death and resurrection through Baptism. St. Patrick also saw to it once people were baptized that they would not fall back into a pagan way of life.

It should not be hard for us to see how all this applies to us. In our times, many of the baptized have forsaken the faith, falling for temptations which reinvent themselves in every age but which in fact are very old, namely, materialism, power, and presumption. Following Jesus and emulating St. Paul and St. Patrick, those of us who preach the Gospel must overcome temptation in our own lives while also being fearless and zealous in proclaiming the Gospel of repentance. So too we must pray that it will be heard and received by the people of our time as it was heard and received by the people of Ireland in St. Patrick's time. But more is needed: each of you must examine your consciences to probe the thoroughness of your conversion, the depth of your faith, and your degree of readiness to share your Catholic faith

with others.

To the Eucharist

Baptism, as you know, is ordered toward the Eucharist, the Mass, in which we have communion with Jesus and with one another in the heart of the Church. As we saw in our first reading, Moses instructed the Israelites on how to make an offering acceptable to God. In the Mass the baptized make a supremely acceptable offering to the Father, namely, the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of his Son Jesus, crucified and risen, a gift we receive and offer as bread and wine become Christ's Body and Blood. It is in our communion with Jesus that we find the strength to overcome temptation; to turn our lives around; to offer the Lord authentic worship and true adoration; and to live as those disciples which St. Paul and St. Patrick sought to attract to Jesus.

When we open our hearts to Christ and confess our sins with heartfelt sorrow, when live our baptismal call to holiness and center our lives on the Eucharist, then it is that we truly honor the memory of the great missionary bishop, the Apostle of Ireland, St. Patrick! In that spirit I say, "Happy St. Patrick's Day!" May God bless us and keep us always in his love!