

Third Sunday in Lent
March 20, 2022
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore Street
Scranton, PA 18508
Luke 13:1-9

On St. Patrick's Day this past week I talked about the broad outlines of the life of this saint, the patron of Ireland and Nigeria, one who is familiar to most Catholics. I spoke of how he was stolen from his native Britain and taken to Ireland, where he was enslaved, how he escaped and went to France to be educated and ordained so that he might return to Ireland to preach the Good News to those who had harmed him. Thus, he became a living icon of forgiveness, a witness to the love of God, one who was able by grace to convert a nation.

What I did not talk about was how long it took even to begin, let alone accomplish, his great work of mercy. Kidnapped at sixteen, he was a slave for six years, and he did not return to Ireland for another twenty years. In our Gospel today we hear how patient the Lord is with his servants, waiting for them to bear the fruit He intends. In the parable of the fig tree, after three years of its bearing no fruit at all, the Lord waits still a fourth year for it to produce. Even more, the tree is nurtured, that it might bring forth what it's supposed to.

The Lord's patience with St. Patrick is instructive. A man who lived just seventy-two years did not begin his life's work until he was in his forty-third year. If the Lord is this patient with one of the greatest evangelists in the history of the Church, how much more patient must we be with those the world says are taking up space or, even worse, wasting their lives. We must never speak this way about anyone but pray instead that regardless of how listless and adrift our neighbors may seem today, that they will still become great vessels of grace tomorrow.

The Lord's forgiveness of St. Patrick is even more instructive than His patience with him. Naturally, we think first of how forgiving this missionary to Ireland was. The very people who had enslaved him were the people St. Patrick returned to first. Indeed, the Irish were in need of repentance, and St. Patrick did not want to see even his tormenters perish. As Jesus says in the gospel, "*Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish,*" speaking of eighteen lives that were lost when the Tower of Siloam fell on them. St. Patrick's zeal for the souls of those who wronged him is what catches our attention first.

What is less well known is the degree to which St. Patrick was first the beneficiary of that same forgiveness and mercy. In his autobiography he writes of how a sin from his youth had become known after he had been ordained a bishop in preparation for the Irish mission. While he was yet in France, having determined to sell his patrimony to fund his work amongst the pagans, St. Patrick was accused of being unworthy of the office of bishop because of a sin he had committed at the age of fifteen, even before his kidnapping and enslavement. His fellow bishops attempted to strip him of his office, and St. Patrick wrote of this incident, "Not slight was the shame and blame that fell upon me." He never revealed

what the sin was, but we must give thanks that the sins of his youth, while he was yet weak, did not prevent him from fulfilling his call.

In fact, we must conclude, based on the incredible graces that flowed through him once he reached the Emerald Isle, that the Lord did not allow the sins of his past life to impede St. Patrick in his mission. It was God whose mercy and forgiveness prevailed, even as St. Patrick's brothers in the episcopacy were unmerciful and unforgiving. Here was a man giving away everything he had in order to bring his own enemies to the foot of the Cross and the love of Jesus Christ, and his own brothers in the Church doubted his sincerity. How grateful we must be that God's forgiveness is more reliable than man's.

St. Patrick's life story shows us that the Lord's call to repentance is not meant as a condemnation. The Lord does not want us to die, to be separated from Him forever. Rather, he desires that we turn in order that we are free to serve Him and bear the fruit that he has been cultivating all along, often without our even realizing His hand at work. It was while St. Patrick was enslaved that he returned to the Lord in all humility and then realized his call. Paradoxically, he was bound by the slavedrivers after he was finally freed through his repentance to bring the Irish out of darkness into light.

The end of the story, of course, is that the fig tree was not cut down, but with the Lord's prodding and gracious patience, it bore fruit of unimaginable magnitude. This must be our expectation for our brothers still living in sin, and even those stuck in neutral, watching the time slip away. If we first forgive them for their inaction, even as we call them to repentance, the patience we exhibit will reflect the Lord's love for them, and His hope that they will one day indeed bear fruit.

And when they finally turn and are ready to answer the Lord's call, may the Patron of the Irish people remind us through his intercessions that the sins of our youth do not disqualify us, and it's never too late to become a conduit of grace to the glory of God and for the salvation of souls.