

## Dear Walt,

How did you celebrate St. Patrick's Day? Most Protestants don't think much about this day, unless it's an excuse to drink. I have a different take on Patrick. To me, St. Patrick's Day is a time to celebrate imagination in evangelism. Did I catch your attention, Walt? Here's some background on how this former slave did artful ministry.

At the age of sixteen (approximately 406 AD), Patrick was kidnapped from his home in Britain into forced slavery in Ireland. During this time of harsh deprivation, Patrick came to the Savior. After seven years, he escaped and returned home. At the ripe age of forty-eight, Patrick responded to God's call and returned to Ireland as a missionary to convert his former captors.

Patrick married himself to the language, customs, and imagination of the Irish people. They excelled at expressing themselves in symbols, metaphors, and images, both visual and poetic. The Irish imagination created wonderful geometric designs, filigree work, and enameling. Instead of urging his converts to renounce these qualities, Patrick embedded the Irish imagination into the gospel and into the life of the Celtic church.

Here were a people intoxicated with the power of words. Noble families maintained ancestral poets. These bards told stories and shared poems that communicated beliefs, history, and old wisdom through entertainment. The poet kept a timeless world alive. "Who knows the secrets of the [Irish] world? Not the learned men, but the poets," writes Esther De Waal.

Patrick intentionally sprinkled the flavor of the poet and the storyteller into the gospel movement, touching the Irish soul through the familiar channels of storytelling, poetry, music, drama, and dance. Thomas Cahill writes, "Yes, the Irish would have said, there is a story that answers our deepest needs--and answers them in a way so good that we could never even have dared dream of. We can put away our knives and abandon our altars. These are no longer required. The God of the Three Faces has given us his own Son, and we are washed clean in the blood of this Lamb."

Celtic Christianity brought a "sensuous reveling" to God's created world. St. Columba, an Irish leader after Patrick, called God "the Lord of the elements." The presence of the Creator in His creation pulsates throughout Irish spirituality, engaging the senses and employing the imagination. The following prayer illustrates how they artfully wove the ordinariness of life into a spiritual act.

*I will kindle my fire this morning,  
In presence of the holy angels of heaven,  
God, kindle Thou in my heart within,  
A flame of love to my neighbor,  
To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all . . .*

Patrick wasn't afraid of what he found in the culture, Walt. Cahill observes

that, "Patrick found a way of swimming down to the depths of the Irish psyche and warming and transforming Irish imagination--making it more humane and more novel while keeping it Irish."

The Celtic people had a fascination with significant numbers, particularly the number three. It's no wonder, then, that the story was told of Patrick using a three-leaved clover to explain the Trinity. Truth was taught through poetry and analogy.

*Three leaves of the shamrock yet no more than one shamrock to wear,  
Frost, snowflakes and ice, all in water their origin share  
Three persons in God; to one God alone we make prayer.*



An example of the transformed imagination is the Celtic cross. In this cross, we see the great round O, the circle of the globe itself, held in tension by the two arms of the cross, creation and redemption together, celebrating the greatness and nearness of God.

In his lifetime, Patrick planted seven hundred churches and baptized "thousands" of people. His gospel wedded salvation and social justice together. Slavery and human sacrifice became unthinkable in Ireland. New laws were influenced by gospel norms. Like the Jews before them, the Irish enshrined literacy as a central religious act. Cahill observes that, "Without the Irish, there would have perished in the west not only literacy but all the habits of the mind that encourage thought." Patrick's missionary descendants took the good news of Jesus, and the gospel of literacy, into the darkness of a devastated

Europe, traveling as far as Italy.

Let me bring Irish spirituality up-to-date, Walt. You know how much I love rock and roll. My sons accuse me of never listening to music that's less than twenty-five years old. However, there's one contemporary band that's caught my attention, U2 from Ireland. Their songs are drenched with images of faith and calls for social justice. They would make Patrick proud. Here's a lyric that rumbles through my mind on occasion.

*I have spoke with the tongue of angels  
I have held the hand of a devil  
It was warm in the night  
I was cold as a stone.*

Temptation is like this for me. At one moment, I'm so spiritual that I could speak with angelic tongues. The next minute, I'm tempted to grab the hand of the devil. What seems warm is really cold. An Irishman put temptation into new words for me.

Let's raise a pint and toast Patrick on this Patty's day, Walt. God wedded his zeal for the gospel to the Irish imagination, transforming a nation for His glory. Imagination is a powerful ally in artful ministry.

Wishing you a Christ-filled St. Patrick's Day,

*Rice*