

Wednesday March 14, 2012

On a pilgrimage with St. Patrick

By Jim Taylor

There may never have been a St. Patrick. Or there may have been several of them.

One of the Patricks certainly left us two letters, containing some details of his life. He was born to a Christian family in Wales, captured and taken to Ireland as a slave. After six years, he escaped, returned home, and eventually went back to Ireland as a missionary. He may have written one letter – his *Declaration* or *Confession* – to defend himself in a trial instigated by the victim of his other letter, a tirade against someone called Coroticus.

A second Patrick – Palladius in Latin – was sent to Ireland by Pope Celestine as a bishop.

Both lived in the 5th century A.D. But there their similarities end.

One Patrick wrote rustic Latin; the other, polished Latin. One evangelized and baptized thousands of pagan Irish; the other serviced existing Christian communities. One worked in Ireland's wilder west and north; the other mainly in the royal cities along the Irish Sea.

In all probability, neither of them threw all the snakes out of Ireland. A total absence of fossils suggests that Ireland never had any snakes to banish. And the shamrock Patrick supposedly used illustrate the Trinity was already a common symbol of pre-Christian Druids.

One of these Patricks died on March 17 and was buried under a large slab of rock in Downpatrick, in one of the most Protestant counties of Northern Ireland. But no one knows for sure which one.

Unimportant information

I had heard all this long before I went on a pilgrimage in Ireland.

As I plodded up a muddy slope along one of those traditional paths, avoiding prickly gorse and sheep droppings, I suddenly realized that the academic research didn't matter.

Instead, I found myself thinking about the thousands of feet that had travelled this trail before me. Wearing sandals, moccasins, boots... Even bare feet, squishing black mud with their toes... Some pilgrims would be silent, devout. Others would be roistering, partying, like many of the characters in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Later, a smaller group of us followed more of that pilgrimage path up Mount Brendan. At one point, the trail snaked above a precipice plunging to a tiny tarn far below.

"I don't think I can go on," said Mary from Los Angeles. She was terrified of heights, she admitted – afraid to go higher, afraid of having to creep back down on her own.

"I'll stay with you," I offered. "If you have to go down, I'll go with you."

Twenty minutes later, Mary stood triumphantly on the peak. I congratulated her.

"It's funny," she replied. "As soon as you promised you wouldn't abandon me, I wasn't afraid any more."

Perhaps that's the whole point of going on a pilgrimage – indeed, of treating life like a pilgrimage. It's about discovering that, as the United Church's creed affirms, "We are not alone." Even if you travel solo, you have company. All who have gone that way before walk with you.

Including St. Patrick himself – whether he was a real person or not.

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YOUR TURN

Apparently, it's not correct that the Inuit have 27 words for "snow," where we limit ourselves to just one. But the responses to last week's column about many kinds of love suggest that our one for that emotion may be inadequate.

Isabel Gibson wrote, "Which of us hasn't experienced the muting of intense desire-love into gentle fondness-love, whether for another person or a food or hobby? Love also reacts to idiosyncracies with everything from irritation/impatience (You/I can be better than that) to acceptance (This, too, is part of the you/self that I love).

"Maybe we need more words to capture love's endless variety; [or] maybe having just the one word keeps us linked--wherever we are in love's range at the time--to those endless varieties, those endless possibilities."

Ted Wilson told me, "I am compelled to say that you didn't go far enough." Ted sent along a collection of pictures showing loved expressed between humans and their furry friends, and concluded, "This love is as real as any you identify in this week's Soft Edges."

Cliff Boldt felt had "saved the best to the penultimate paragraph." That was where I mused about the lack of anything but the Father Almighty image in our churches.

To which Suzanne Edgar responded, "Regarding the image of God as Almighty, last Sunday was the reading from Genesis where El Shaddai talks to Abraham regarding having a child with Sarah. The Inclusive Bible notes that El Shaddai has been [traditionally] translated as God Almighty, but may just as easily mean, 'God with breasts'. I took courage in hand this week, and used the latter translation; no one fainted. "

JT note: The Inclusive Bible's footnote states, "The name El Shaddai is usually translated 'The Almighty' under the assumption that it derives either from the word 'shadad' which means 'powerful' or from 'shadah' which means 'mountain.' There is growing opinion, however, that Shaddai may derive from the word 'shad' or 'breast'...."

Steve Roney informed me that the ancient Greeks actually defined FOUR kinds of love, not three. The fourth is "storge," which refers to familial love, such as parent/child, or the familiar affection that builds between friends. When I Googled the word, I discovered that C.S. Lewis had written an entire book on the subject of different kinds of love, "The Four Loves." Wikipedia explains that the book "is prefaced by Lewis' admission that he initially mistook St. John's words *"God is Love"* as a simple beginning point... Further meditation revealed two different kinds of love: 'need-love' (such as the love of a child for its mother) as distinguished from 'gift-love' (epitomized by God's love for humanity)."

Steve argued that Father "is the prime Biblical image -- although God as lover is present in Song of Solomon, God as friend in Jesus, and even God as child in the image of the Christ Child. It is interesting, and I think we have to assume that it is significant, that the one image that is not used in the Bible seems to be God as Mother. I'd assume the Bible knows what it is talking about."

James West, from a Saturday night at sea somewhere with the U.S. Navy, commented, "I've been taught and haven't found a compelling argument to believe otherwise, that 1 Corinthians 13 is all about God's love, i.e., how the Triune God loves all of creation. Our experience and analogies flow from that Divine love, well described by Paul and his experience of God.

ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I still have half a dozen copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada's Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I'm probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is "Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists," by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6th Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can't send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites," a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
