

Homily

Vigil of St Patrick, Evening Prayer

St Patrick's Cathedral, Ballarat, March 16, 2022



In the lead up to Saint Patrick's Day, a few people were talking about Irish jokes. One of the people in the group was Irish herself and she said that she knew an Irish joke about milk bottles. She said, "If you had a row of milk bottles, how could you tell which was the Irish milk bottle? You could pick them up and look at the base of the bottles. The Irish one would be the one that said, 'Open other end.'"

With Irish jokes, the Irish are the butt of the jokes, and it was generous of that Irish woman to tell a joke on herself. It showed good humour on her part. One of the gifts we've received from Ireland is a gift of humour, in Irish jokes and Irish comedians. But that's not the only gift that Ireland has shared with the world. On this vigil of St Patrick, we remember particularly the gift of faith.

St Patrick brought the good news of Christ to the peoples of Ireland. The Irish in turn carried that good news to many lands around the world, including this great South Land of Australia. From the beginnings of European settlement here, so many Irish laity, religious and priests have come to Australia and shared their Christian faith. They have done so much to build up the Catholic community. And in doing so, they have drawn inspiration from St Patrick as the great apostle of Ireland, the missionary who sowed the seeds of faith in those earliest days.

How would we describe St Patrick's style of faith? I'd say that St Patrick's faith was a vigorous faith. It was a strong faith, a hearty faith, a dynamic faith. St Patrick believed firmly in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He believed that God had come to live among us in the person of Christ. He believed that we should place our trust in Christ to help us meet the challenges of life.

There is a hymn that reflects something of this vigorous Christianity associated with St Patrick. It's a hymn called St Patrick's Breastplate. It suggests putting on the armour of Christ to protect us on the tough journey of life.

The hymn begins by invoking the name of God as the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

*I bind unto myself today the strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three.*

Then the hymn recalls some images from the life of Christ.

*I bind this day to me for ever. By power of faith, Christ's incarnation;
His baptism in the Jordan river; His death on Cross for my salvation;
His bursting from the spiced tomb; His riding up the heavenly way;
His coming at the day of doom; I bind unto myself today.*

The hymn then calls on God to guide us and guard us on life's journey.

*I bind unto myself today the power of God to hold and lead,
His eye to watch, His might to stay, His ear to hearken to my need.
The wisdom of my God to teach, His hand to guide, His shield to ward,
The word of God to give me speech, His heavenly host to be my guard.*

As we celebrate the vigil of St Patrick, I pray that we will have the strength to live with faith in Christ with something of the vigour and enthusiasm of St Patrick. As Christ was with St Patrick, so may Christ be with us each step of the way along the road of life.

This evening we bless a statue of St Patrick that is to stand in our cathedral. It was originally donated to

St Patrick's Church in Rokewood in 1959 as a gift from John Leemon and Agnes Doyle in memory of their parents and sister. It is wonderful that we have some family members with us this evening as we welcome the statue to St Patrick's cathedral.

We already had an image of St Patrick, in the form of a stained glass window near the entrance of the cathedral. That image shows St Patrick holding a cross and a shamrock and preaching to the people, young and old. The statue that we bless this evening complements that stained glass window. The statue shows St Patrick holding a church, a symbol of how he welcomed people into the Christian community and built up the community of the Church in those early days.

Here in the cathedral, the statue will stand near the statue of Christ and the statue of St Mary MacKillop. It is so fitting that his statue stands close to that of Christ because he lived his life in such close union with Christ. It's also fitting that his statue stands close to that of St Mary Mackillop because they both had such an impact on the history of the Church in Australia. St Patrick sowed seeds of faith among the people of Ireland. Then, so many from Ireland came to these shores and sowed seeds of faith in Australia. St Mary MacKillop continued that missionary tradition. She travelled to so many places around this land, sharing her faith far and wide.

This evening we give thanks for all the saints who have gone before us. As we welcome the statue of St Patrick, we give thanks particularly for this saint of Ireland who has inspired so many in living the Catholic faith in Australia. St Patrick, pray for us as we live our Catholic faith today.

Bishop Paul Bird CSsR