

St Brigid's Day, 2026

Welcome to Brigid Fest 2026.

Most of us have Brigid's somewhere in our family tree, so who was Brigid? It is claimed she was born in 451 in Dundalk, Ireland, and died in 525. She is more commonly known as Brigid of Kildare where a monastic settlement was established in her name around an ancient well. With Patrick and Columba or Columcille, Brigid is celebrated throughout Ireland to this day despite being dropped from the official Catholic calendar in 1969 by Pope Paul 6 for "lack of evidence of her existence". Yet, in 2023 she was proclaimed one of the 3 patron saints of Ireland and her feast day is now a public holiday!

What is it then that keeps the Brigid story alive and flourishing, regardless of intervention by institutions or individuals?

Her story has always been a mixture of possible fact overlaid with deep Celtic mythology. It cannot be separated from that intertwining.

Myth draws us to understand who and what we are on a more enhanced scale than facts alone. It gives breadth and depth and flexibility to our ever-developing understanding of the world and our place in it. Myth enables on-going interpretation through the ages to provide insight and direction.

Unless we are First Nations people, those of us who have lived our lives in Australia have not been exposed to the mystical power of customs developed from ancient beliefs in gods, goddesses and the rocks, rivers, wells and mountains around us.

Historically, Irish people have held on to an understanding of crossover between the physical and spiritual world at certain times and in certain situations. Times such as Halloween, which falls in the Celtic season when the veil between the living and the dead is at its thinnest; times when the wail of the ban si signals death. The sile-na-gig is carved into the edifice of some churches and acknowledged with the angels and saints.

Many of the stories around Brigid fit comfortably here. So, whether Brigid actually lived, or is the Christianisation of a deep-seated belief in an ancient goddess, is to a large extent immaterial. The qualities of generosity, compassion, healing, learning, courageous leadership, attributed to her, have been an integral part of Celtic culture throughout time. Devotion to Brigid is centred in the designated feminine aspects of living – such as nurturing, sheltering, protecting from outside

threats. The long-established practice of the Rag Tree – whilst not directly associated with Brigid – is a means of accessing healing and forgiveness through belief in a transforming power. The making of symbols like the cross of rushes, of doing the rounds, of assisting the stranger, leaving a light on in welcome, are outward signs of response to the call to be the best we can be. We have responsibility for the world we make around us.

The Celtic world has Brigid as a model. The 14 hundred years that have passed since her emergence have seen the Irish people contend with seemingly insurmountable obstacles to their country, language, culture. Over all that time their perseverance and survival has been sustained by the strength of ancient beliefs translated into living tradition through art, ritual, story-telling, song, community celebrations and action.

We who have gathered here today are the recipients of that tradition by birthright, ancestry or interest.

As we celebrate our interpretation of the Brigid legacy, we Australians might reflect on who we select as role models to inspire us in creating a world around us that is visionary, compassionate, and life-giving.

In conclusion, I invite you to visit St Patrick's Cathedral and ponder the stained glass window at the back of the Cathedral, left hand side. The window was donated by the Loreto Sisters in memory of the first bishop of Ballarat. It features Brigid holding the crozier – the symbol of episcopal pastoral care and authority. She is seated outdoors, possibly on a rock - not on a throne. She is speaking to a gathering around her who are intent on every word. What was her message then? What is she saying today?

Thank you, Brigid!