

Homily at Aust Centre for Christianity and Culture 16-March 2009

On the last cold day of December in the year 406AD, the river Rhine froze over so solid that it made a natural bridge for the people whom the Romans called the Barbarians to begin the journey across various rivers -including the Rhine and the Tiber - to invade Rome.

That was the beginning of the famous fall of Rome. With that came the Dark Ages. Learning, scholarship and culture more or less disappeared from the European continent. The ancient scholarship of Greece and Rome and the great libraries were destroyed; the sacred writings, the Bible, the works of the early Fathers: gone. This is the context for our period of history.

St Augustine had been born in Africa of a Roman officer father; Patrick was born in Roman Britain of a Roman officer father (a deacon), and was the grandson of a married priest

Now you all know Patrick's story: a) Slavery b) Called to bring good news to Ireland c) Trained in the monastery of St Martin of Tours. Patrick drank in the story of God/Jesus and the richness of the learning and philosophy of his time.

In bringing the good news to Ireland, Patrick met an ancient Celtic culture. Its love of the land, sea, water, air,

its fertility and harvest rites, these were baptised with the rich story of Christ.

Patrick's preaching was followed by a 'green' martyrdom. There were no 'red' martyrs until eleven centuries later, thanks to Elizabeth I (bless her). What on earth is green martyrdom? It means living in a cave (or on a rocky island) as a hermit, like St Kevin of Glendalough. But disciples came and begged the Kevins: 'Do come out of your cave and teach us.'

So the monasteries grew as places of prayer formation and learning. What learning? Jesus' good news, but also the ancient teachers of Greece and Rome. What about books? Ah, that's where the brilliant copying began - beautiful manuscripts of scripture and ancient books of learning, as well as ancient traditions and legends, stories of the Irish people.

The country became so open to the good news and on fire with Patrick's fire of faith, they felt compelled to spread it as Jesus told them to. I shall concentrate on two of the many early missionaries, Columba and Columbanus.

Columbcille (or Columba) died 1400 years ago this year. A nobleman, Crimthann (Fox) - red headed - a fantastic leader, he founded by the age of forty something like 41 Irish monasteries including Durrow, Kells and Derry.

Columba ran into trouble - caused war. Excommunications followed. Columba's penance was permanent exile. He sailed with twelve others to the Hebrides and landed in Iona. The Picts were the Celtic people of the north. (They painted pictures on their bodies and frightened hell out of the Romans and the Britons.)

What an impact this spiritual son of Patrick made. When there were 150 monks at Iona, it was too crowded, so the leader and twelve went off to found again, and again and again. By the time of Columba's death at the end of the sixth century, he was responsible for sixty monastic communities up and down the mainland and islands of Scotland. Then Aidan his spiritual son of Lindisfarne did the same for northern England. What bravery! St Brendan is reputed to have sailed to Greenland and North ^{America} (Tim Severin's Brendan Voyage proved the possibility of such a journey.)

One of the greatest of those heralds of the gospel was Columbanus (after whom the Columban Fathers take their name). He was twenty years younger than Columba. His success in founding monasteries in Gaul (modern day France) was phenomenal. The local bishops - leading lives too comfortable for spreading the gospel - summoned him to a meeting. He sent a sharp letter calculated to send the bishops right up their well plastered wall! The bishops and the Visigoth princess Brunhilda had him deported. After shipwreck and endless disasters, he found other mission fields.

The full story would take too long to tell. Suffice it to say that Columba's spiritual sons left a trail of monasteries right across France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. These centres would eventually become cities: Lumieges, Auxerre, Lyon, Luxeuil, Liège, Trier, Wartzburg, Regensburg, Rheinau, Reichenau, Salzburg, Vienna, St Gall (San Gallen), Bobbio, Fiesole, Lucca and many, many others.

The women went as well, though not so much is written of them.

Irish missionaries went to Moravia and as far as Kiev in Russia. They brought with them an enormous faith and courage, a deep love of Jesus and the holy scriptures. Between 650 and 850 half of all the biblical commentaries were written by Irishmen.

They brought a love of learning - of philosophy and wisdom. Their monastic university schools breathed new life into exhausted Europe and as Thomas Cahill wrote in his celebrated book, That's how the Irish Saved Civilization

St Patrick lit a big, big fire. His spiritual sons and daughters carried on the great tradition. We who love Ireland have every right to be proud, to celebrate today's feast in style, but we too should also keep the flame alive and spread Good News.