

3.15.2023 Lent Midweek, Week 3

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 55:6-12; Ephesians 1:15-23

“Faith in Jesus, Love toward All”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Tonight, we remember two saints commemorated this week on the church calendar: Gregory the Great (March 12) and Patrick (March 17). Both Gregory and Patrick lived during a time of great transition between the end of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Medieval period. The 5th to the 8th century was a time of great political upheaval and cultural chaos. Both Patrick and Gregory worked to answer these challenges, to inculturate the gospel of Jesus Christ in their own day and time.

Saint Patrick (c.390-461) was born in Roman Britain toward the end of the Roman Empire. The reason that Patrick is commemorated as the “Apostle of Ireland” has more to do with Christian mission than with the green beer and corned beef of our modern-day cultural celebrations. Of course, the stories about Patrick using the shamrock to explain the Trinity and banishing snakes are also legends.

Though much of Patrick’s life remains obscure, what can be said without dispute is that the challenges he faced in late Roman Britain shaped his reliance upon Jesus Christ. When he was a teenager, Patrick was abducted and forced into slavery for six years in Ireland as a shepherd. After escaping to France, he had vision urging him to return to Ireland as a missionary. After training for the priesthood, Patrick was sent to Ireland to replace a bishop who had died within a year of arriving. Around the year 432, Patrick was consecrated bishop of Ireland by Pope Celestine and worked primarily among pagan communities, making significant converts. At the time of Patrick’s death in 461, after nearly 30 years of mission, Ireland had adopted the Christian faith.

Yet who was this obscure man named Patrick? He was certainly someone possessed by the love of Christ, with a straightforward and warm faith. With great humility, Patrick spoke of his own lack of ability and fitness for the office of bishop, and yet he tirelessly worked, traveled, preached, and baptized, building up the body of Christ in Ireland.

One of the two undisputed works written by Patrick, titled *Confessio*, contains the following,

[God] answered my prayer in such a way that in the last day, ignorant though I am, I might be bold enough to take up so holy and so wonderful a task, and imitate in some degree those who the Lord had so long ago foretold as heralds of his Gospel, bearing witness to all nations.

Patrick, by recalling Christ's Great Commission of the disciples to all nations, was placing himself in discipleship to Christ's mission to the world.

Patrick's faith can be seen in his prayer printed in the back of today's bulletin, containing prayer petitions for "God's strength to pilot me" and "God's wisdom to guide me." Patrick's reliance upon Jesus to pilot him over the tempestuous seas of change in his own era are an encouragement for us to ask Christ to pilot us and our church as we face change and transition.

The other saint we remember tonight, Gregory the Great, was commemorated this past Sunday, March 12. Unlike Patrick, Gregory was the son of a Roman senator, and in 573 at about 30 years of age, Gregory became the prefect of Rome, that city's highest ranking civil administrator. As prefect, Gregory possessed all the administrative and imperial power needed to maintain order within the city, and yet rather than pursuing temporal power as an administrator, Gregory eventually abandoned public life to become a Christian monk. He sold his vast properties and devoted the proceeds to the relief and care of the poor. He founded the monastery of St. Andrew's in Rome, and also established and endowed six monasteries in Sicily. After serving as the see of Rome's representative to Constantinople for seven years, Gregory was recalled to Rome, and in 590 was unanimously chosen to become bishop of Rome.

Gregory is remembered for his concern of justice for the poor, and for modeling spirituality among the clergy. Gregory helped shape the order of eucharistic worship, fixing the Our Father in its present location in the service. Gregory fostered the further development of church music, the singing of Alleluia, as well as emphasizing the importance of preaching. In addition, Gregory's influence upon global mission was significant. He sent a group of forty missionaries, led by a monk named Augustine, to Britain. They founded what continues today as the Church of England, with the Diocese of Canterbury at its center.

With regard to missionary methods, Gregory argued for what today would be called the "inculturation of the gospel" by encouraging the church not to destroy existing local cultures but to build upon them, planting the seed of the gospel so that it might grow within and transform culture.

Our hymnal contains a hymn written by Gregory, "Lord God, We Praise You" (ELW 558). The first verse reads, "Lord God, we praise you, now the night is over, active and watchful, standing here before you; singing, we offer prayer and meditation; thus we adore you." These words describe both Gregory and Patrick, along with ourselves: "active and watchful, standing here

before you; singing, we offer prayer and meditation; thus we adore you.” In other words, our work as Christians in the world is to be both active and watchful – actively serving others while being watchful for the leading of God’s Spirit in our church and in our lives.

For us today, these two saints represent a model of incarnational ministry in which the gospel is embodied in the particularity of our own cultural contexts. Patrick and Gregory are examples of trust that Christ is bringing about a “new creation” in each of us, transforming us into vessels carrying the gospel in this world.

In tonight’s reading from Ephesians, Paul writes, “*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and your love toward all the saints.*” This is why we remember Patrick and Gregory: they reveal faith in Jesus and love toward all in this world. They help us see how Christ is incarnated in us. We are also vessels carrying a message of love, piloted by Jesus over the seas of our own tempestuous and challenging times.

The Christian story is never finished and never fully told. It requires you to tell your story of God’s love alive in you.

Trust that Christ lives in you, and live with love toward all people. Amen.