

The Churches of St John & St Patrick

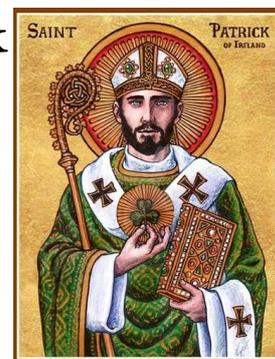
servicing the Parish of St William

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Dear Parishioners,

Our Lord promised his disciples, 'Whatever you bind on earth will be considered bound in heaven.' The Church exercises this Christ-given authority in many ways. She shows it for example when she solemnly establishes a relationship between one of her children here on earth and one of the saints. That happens when a child is given a saint's name at Baptism. From that moment the saint 'adopts' that child and takes very seriously indeed their duty to pray for the child until he or she is safely home in heaven. This is why we encourage parents to give their child a saint's name. Calling the baby 'Tinkerbell' just doesn't do it.

The Church doesn't just give patron saints to people. She also asks the saints to adopt schools, hospitals and countries. On Thursday our country celebrates the feast day of its patron, St George. Devotion to St George goes back many centuries in England and we think he became its Patron Saint in about 1347. Over the years he has protected us many times, not least in times of war. We remember Henry V going into battle crying, 'God for Harry, England and St George!'

But the relationship between a Patron Saint and those in his care is a two-way thing. The saint promises to pray. And we have the responsibility of imitating our Patron. What does that mean for us on St George's Day? Well St George was a martyr, which literally means, 'Witness'. There surely can be no greater witness to one's faith than martyrdom. Perhaps each of us should ask ourselves what kind of Christian witness we give.

Is there anything else we can learn from St George? Let's not totally discount the famous story of St George and the dragon. There can be truths to discover even in what seems like legend. The story goes that St George, a knight, was riding across Libya and came to a city called Sylene, which was being terrorised by a dragon. The citizens began placating it by feeding it sheep but once it had consumed all of their flocks they moved on to giving it their children. When St George arrived the king's own daughter was about to be sacrificed. Horrified, the saint engaged the dragon in combat and slew it. He then admonished the citizens never again to appease evil. It will only make greater and greater demands.

This is true of the temptations that come to each of us individually and to nations. We can be very proud of the way our country stood up to Nazism during the Second World War. It was with St George-like perception that Churchill, in the face of much opposition, urged the country to confront Hitler, 'this haunted, morbid being whom the German peoples... in their bewilderment, have worshipped as a god.'

Our own age, though, also has its dragons. When Parliament passed the Abortion Act in 1967 we were told that it would address the tragic situations that women sometimes find themselves in but that abortions would be responsibly controlled. Fifty years on and we read that a quarter of pregnancies in our country are currently ended by abortion. Can these all be the tragic situations

for which the Act was intended? I'm sure everyone would agree that support should be given to women who do find themselves in difficult circumstances. Good counselling and adoption services are so important.

But is there something else going on here? St John Paul used to say that we have before us a choice between a Culture of Life and a Culture of Death. Do we see other people as opportunities for us to love and give ourselves? Or do we see them as rivals whose existence might inhibit our freedom? Rivals we would consider getting rid of if the law permitted it? In such a Culture the ones who need to watch out are the weak: unborn children and the elderly. The media, especially Movies and TV Soaps, have already been softening us up for some time for the acceptance of assisted dying.

There are some very important battles ahead of us. But at the outset it's crucial that, like St George, we see clearly what is at stake: every person's right to life, from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. As we celebrate St George's Day this year, let's resolve to stand up for the Culture of Life. It will make our Patron Saint so happy on his feast day.

God bless you,

Father O'Shea