

PLANTING SEASON

Very Reverend Glenn Jones

Vicar General, Vicar for Clergy, Vicar for Religious

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Ah, 'tis St. Paddy's Day, when those (we) of Irish descent (and many others) celebrate this great man who promoted so successfully the Christian faith in the land of Erin, so much so as to be the isle's patron saint and called "the Apostle of Ireland."

But other than being associated with "the green" and legends about ridding Ireland of snakes, few know much of the history of St. Patrick. He was not born Irish, but actually Welsh or Scottish, taken in a slave raid as a boy by Irish pagans or possibly pirates. After six years, he escaped and returned home and eventually became a priest, then returned to Ireland to evangelize. Of course, his work was instrumental in the conversion of Ireland to Christianity.

In his autobiographical "Confession," Patrick writes: "I give unceasing thanks to my God, who kept me faithful in the day of my testing. Today, I can offer him sacrifice with confidence, giving myself as a living victim to Christ, my Lord ... I came to the Irish peoples to preach the Gospel and endure the taunts of unbelievers, putting up with reproaches ... suffering many persecutions, even bondage ... for the benefit of others ... If I am worthy, I am ready also to give up my life without hesitation and most willingly, for His name. I want to spend myself in that country, even in death, if the Lord should grant me this favor ... for he gave me the great grace that through me many peoples should be reborn in God..."

Hmmm. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)

Like Patrick, any true Christian seeks to plant the seed of self-giving in faith and charity as best he can in each person he meets. Yet he need also remember that while he may not have such wide or immediate influence as St. Patrick, some seeds grow quickly, some slowly ... and yet the slowest may produce the strongest of trees ... from the smallest of beginnings. Even the largest redwood—the [General Sherman](#)—began life the size of a tomato seed. Similarly, one never knows which act of faith or kindness may plant a redwood of faith ... like the man whose kindness influenced young Karol Wojtyla to look into becoming a priest ... and eventually pope and saint: the beloved John Paul II.

A verse from today's Mass Gospel gives pause for reflection: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." (John 12:24)

This seeming paradox—as is so much of what Jesus said, and, even more so, what Jesus *did*—guides the Christian life ... as it did for St. Patrick, who sacrificed home and family to bring the love of God even to his former enslavers.

Yes, the Christian faith is replete with paradoxes, prompting St. Paul to claim that Jesus' crucifixion is "...a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles..." (1 Corinthians 1:23). For the Jews, a "weak" God submitting Himself to not only becoming human but submitting Himself to torture and death, was inconceivable. For the Gentiles—then, and for those who cannot believe even today—to believe in a "god" who is also Man ... who let Himself be killed like a meek lamb ... is simply folly. And the resurrection? Forget it!

Yes, paradox ... as St. Paul relays that Jesus said to him: "...my power is made perfect in weakness" ... (2 Corinthians 12:19) and so the Apostle affirms in faith: "...when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:10) And even more so, Jesus tells us: "He who finds his life shall lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39) And "...whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all." (Mark 10:44). "Love your enemies; do good to those who hurt you." (Matthew 5:44). "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first." (Matthew 19:30)

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Paradox is a defining characteristic of our faith: the all-powerful God came to earth as a helpless man-child ... a virgin with child ... the same all-powerful God dying upon the cross ... the eternal God, dead in the tomb. The dead one rising to eternal life. One who is wholly God, and yet also wholly man. One God in three persons ... each person wholly, and not only partly, God. God suffers death so that men and women may live.

As St. Augustine wrote: “Life goes down to be killed; Bread goes down to suffer hunger; the Way goes down to be exhausted on his journey; the Spring goes down to suffer thirst...” (Sermo 78)

And yet how like the Christian life that is. We grow in the Church ... watered by God’s Word and the sacraments, warmed by God’s grace ... to ever greater spiritual maturity. So, like St. Ignatius, martyr, Christians may become the wheat of grace ground to become bread for others ... not necessarily through martyrdom, but through *service*—feeding God’s little ones with their prayer and their work.

So we, in Christian paradox, must give of ourselves ... die to ourselves ... die to selfishness, egoism, pride ... so we may truly live. Is it no wonder the unbelieving world regards this as folly ... and yet, it is truth.

In His parables, Jesus uses analogies with which His audience would be familiar—the grain of wheat dying, being planted, producing much fruit. For our own analogy here in New Mexico, we might look at the mountains ... the canyons ... the beauty of the forest ... and remember that some pines require extreme heat to bring forth new life, their cones only opening in fire, and their seed-nuts are planted only through death. And yet, with that trial of fire are planted thousands, if not millions, of seeds which had theretofore lain dormant—an apt analogy of God’s grace, which brings to fruitfulness charity, empathy, and love through the fires of faith.

“... since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12:28-29)