

14 Pentecost
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Celtic Stewardship!

I used to wonder six years ago why Episcopal priests hated giving the Annual Stewardship Sermon on Pledge Sunday. Now I know. It is not because it is difficult, it is because after you have done it five times, what else is there to say about pledging and giving?

Today is Pledge Sunday and this is the Annual Stewardship Sermon requested by your Vestry to inaugurate the 4 weeks of our Parish Pledge Drive.

Now if we divided the Nave of this church into two and on my right was England and on my left was Ireland, I would have to be standing??? In the middle of the Irish Sea. The year is 432BC. Patrick is no longer the young boy who was enslaved in Ireland for years as a youth.

After he escaped he trained for the priesthood and returned to work in England. There he remained till the age of 48 when he was made a Bishop.

Now the people of England were called English?-Wrong, the English hadn't been invented yet. The people who mattered in England in 432 were Roman.

The Romans in England were not happy and for several reasons. First they were far from home in a cold wet land, but still had to pay taxes to Caesar.

They had never been to Ireland and considered that land and its people as Barbarians. Barbarians to the Romans were a people who went into battle wearing sword and shield, but no clothes. The Irish fitted this description. Except the women who fought with sword and shield and just a little Chanel.

Patrick was sent to Ireland with 12 Monks by the Roman church in England who hoped for new sources of revenues.

Ireland had a population of about 350 thousand people divided into some 150 tribes, who constantly fought one another. It was a fierce and unhappy land. Tribal chiefs ruled the tribes and Druid priests controlled the population with superstition, human child sacrifice and rituals dedicated to the four seasons

and the four great elements of wind, earth, fire and water. Only the Druids possessed the secret knowledge of their religion and they were greatly feared.

Patrick went directly to the tribal chiefs and requested to live among the people. He farmed and built his church, preached and cared for all who needed him. His monks shared everything with the poor. They healed the sick and rescued and sheltered the homeless.

Instead of replacing Irish symbols, holidays and feasts, Patrick incorporated them into his Christian calendar. With music and preaching he taught the people about a God of love who was not to be feared. Patrick's God brought sunshine and rain and made the fields and crops grow. He brought the fruits of the harvest and the sacred birth of new life.

The people freed from fear became a happy people and Christianity spread from tribe to tribe across the land bringing an end to war and a unity among all peoples. Everywhere Patrick and his monks went they built stone churches and the churches became the focal point of village and country life.

Back in England the Romans were not happy believing that Patrick had gone native. Stories of his fame and his Celtic church abounded. The English Romans complained to Rome and the Pope that Patrick's church paid no taxes but to no avail.

The truth was much different. Patrick had tapped into a rich vein of Irish culture where everything was shared and distributed among the people; it was a sharing of the harvest and the fruits of God's love. But it was also a sharing of talent, ability and what each person had to contribute to the community.

The Celtic church would exist for some 700 years untouched by the unhappy Roman church to the East. It was only at the Synod of Whitby that the Romans conspired to force the Celts to conform to a Roman way of doing things.

It was a great mistake that lasted for centuries till the Reformation.

What we have to decide over the next four weeks is whether to be unhappy Romans giving because we are required to give? Or are we going to model ourselves on those ancient happy Celts who gave because giving was an intricate part of who they were as a community?

We could well see ourselves as a village community that is totally dependant on the talent, ability and resources of one another to grow this church and develop its ministries.

The Celts believed that God would send them what they needed to live their lives and prosper.

Our experience over the last six years should have taught us that this church is blessed. God has blessed it. Not because we are holy people, we still have wild Irish tribes that would go into battle naked; God has blessed us because we do the work of Jesus Christ his son.

If giving and sharing was so important to those early Celtic Christians, then surely it must have an importance in our lives also.

You cannot give to God that he does not give back to you 10 fold. How many times now have we as a parish sent a sum of money to Africa or another church, money we could ill afford, only to find it returned within weeks by some gift or other?

We are at a stage in our parish growth that is critical. For all the preaching we have done over the last six years. Stewardship is not something we have taken to our hearts. I find that sad because I know how much so many people love this church.

It is time that we did Stewardship from the heart. It is time to give to God and see our church flourish. Do not be a Roman, be a Celt and God will bring you happiness.

Amen+