

St Brigid

Our people are peculiar in many respects. Our thought is to see other countries rather than our own, to accept models from abroad rather than try to create our own, and particularly to be enamoured of distant saints rather than our own very marvellous ones. This latter is a correct classification. If you go through the early annals of our people you cannot but be struck by the extraordinary figures which march across the stage of our Christianity.

Among those giants who are taken so casually is the one I am about to discuss, that is the mighty Brigid. She is regarded as having been the mother of all the saints of Ireland just as St Patrick has always been regarded as their father. St Patrick's personality exceeded all other great men in Ireland, so St Brigid's brilliant, generous, joyous figure eclipsed all other women. She was picturesquely styled a dove among birds, a vine among trees and a sun among stars. Quite evidently she caught the imagination of the people who lived nearest to her own time. A poetical derivation of her name was the Fiery Arrow which effectively describes her fiery character.

It is popularly supposed that she was the first girl to become a nun in Ireland, but this is a mistaken idea. St Patrick had received the vows of a number before her. Moreover he did not receive her. According to the generally accepted chronology she was only about eleven years old when St Patrick died. So another fond idea has to be sacrificed, namely that it was she who wove with her own hands his winding sheet. That could not have been the case because of those figures.

If she was not the first nun, who were the first nuns in Ireland? Fidelma the red-haired and Eithne the golden-haired, who were blood sisters. An overwhelming circumstance attended their reception. They received the veil together followed by Holy Communion, and then they died at once. They were laid out on the same couch. This manifestation represented a taking by God of the first fruits. It was a phenomenon reminiscent of that of the Holy Innocents themselves, and it must have been accepted as an indication of the abundant crop of vocations which were about to crop up in Ireland.

St Brigid is generally believed to have been born of noble Christian parents, but this again is not completely accurate. It is true that her father was a chieftain, or minor king, but he was a pagan. Her mother Brocessa was a slave and a Christian. Brigid was illegitimate and was born into slavery. It must be significant that St Patrick too was a slave. God has unusual ways of working. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Through one or other of her parents, Brigid was kin to St Columba whose birth she foretold, and with whom she was eventually to lie in the same tomb. She was born about the year 450 at Faughart, two miles north-east of Dundalk. It was Cuchulain's territory and it is certain that

her childish fancy was exalted by the stories of his exploits. Her mother was sold to a druid. Brigid went along with her, but remained the property of her father, who bore the same name as I do! She was claimed back again when she reached some little size and was likely to be useful about the place. She took the place her mother had formerly filled in working the little mill which ground the corn; washing the feet of guests; tending the sheep and farm animals, looking after the dairy. In these occupations she was described as being submissive but not happy.

By reason of those duties of hers, she has been regarded as the patron of livestock. Bear that in mind: any of you whose lives are cast in that department. The Scottish Gael invokes her at sheep-shearing and the Scottish weaver as he chooses his coloured wools.

At this time she is marvellously beautiful; bright eyed with an abundance of golden-brown hair; physically very strong. It is usually thought that her father's wife was cruel to her, but we have to be reserved in regard to that. For a feature of young Brigid's character has to be reviewed. Already she has become holy, conspicuous for her faith and generosity. As she said herself: 'Since my mind was first set on God it never departed from him.' She understood the primary doctrine that Christ lives in each one of us and this made it hard for her to refuse anyone who appealed to her. The supplies committed to her care often suffered. Stories which have their amusing side are told of some deficiencies being made good by miraculous action. She remained incorrigible in this respect though spoken to again and again. The provisions were found missing just when they were wanted, and this beggar and that beggar had benefited! But it is of interest, and this should be set off against that stepmother story, that she

does not seem to have been physically ill-treated. She was not beaten in spite of her misdeeds. Her saying was: 'I find it hard to deny Christ his own food.' Finally her father and his wife resolved to get rid of this valuable but most embarrassing girl.

At this time her heart had but one aspiration, and that was to become a nun. Her father freed her from slavery and offered her as wife, some say to the king of north Leinster, others say to a well-known poet. Known to all is the legend of her prayer that she would be saved from this marriage, and of the ensuing facial disfigurement. The love-sick swain did not want a disfigured wife. So the match was called off and she had her way.

She received the veil along with seven others whom she herself had assembled, from the hands of Bishop Mel at Croghan Hill near Tyrrell's Pass in Co. Westmeath. She recovered her beauty at the moment of her consecration, and retained it until the end of her life. St Mel is supposed to have been a nephew of St Patrick, and St Brigid was at that time between 15 and 17 years of age. It is astounding that one of her youth should be showing such capacity for leadership.

This foundation at Croghan Hill was a unique event, because it represented the introduction of community life among nuns. Those who had been consecrated up to that time had not lived in community. It has been said that she was the first woman engaged permanently in the service of the Church. It may be a large order to apply that to the whole Church but it is probably correct to ascribe it to her in respect to Ireland.

After this she went to Kildare in her father's territory and she founded the famous church of Cill Dara, the church of the oak. It was thus called from the beautiful tree in whose

shade she built the church, sometime between the years 480 and 490. That tree remained until the end of the tenth century. The foundation grew rapidly. She established two separate monasteries, one for men, the other for women, both under her own supervision; so the Legion of Mary was not the first mixed organisation in Ireland in which women have played a governing part. Later on, I suppose as a sort of gesture to public opinion, she appointed St Conleth to carry on this task jointly with her.

The church itself was magnificent; lofty and richly decorated. This was not a time when you just covered a wall with paint and you were finished! The walls of the churches in those days were beautifully illuminated, sometimes covered with leather, and the leather itself embossed, coloured and beautifully rendered. A screen separated the altar from the congregation, a practice which still prevails among sections of the Byzantine Church. The monks were on one side of the church, the nuns on the other, and there was a partition down the centre of the church separating them. That is a custom which has in places persevered among the people up to this day; not separation by a screen but by allocation of section.

Kildare became a great religious city, possessing many different schools and attracting people from far and wide. St Brigid herself enjoyed an ascendancy which we must regard as amazing. Her great mind and her talents were universally recognised. She was invited all over Ireland, strange to say for the purpose of preaching. In her lifetime she was everywhere venerated and her miracles were innumerable. In circumstances of difficulty a phrase was often heard on her lips: 'Leave that to me.' And it was invariably followed by the working of a miracle.

One story told of her is that there was a gathering of people in circumstances of difficulty, perhaps some sort of climatic trouble such as tempest. The crowd had nothing much to do; I suppose they spent some of their time at prayer. St Brigid pointed to a harp on the wall and asked if anybody knew how to play. Nobody did. Then she said to one man: 'Take that harp and play it.' Though he did not know a thing about music he took the harp and entertained the company with most delightful strains.

Her travelling was mostly done in a chariot, drawn by two horses and with a driver. Usually she would have a couple of other nuns with her. Once coming to the Shannon at Athlone, a scandalous charge was demanded by the ferryman. She was determined not to pay this so she set herself to pray and it is alleged that the depth of the water diminished so much that the river could be forded.

The great woman is strangely reminiscent of St Teresa of Avila, who likewise journeyed much. St Brigid is hailed as a patron of travellers.

We have little record of her scholarship but probably it was of a considerable order. Otherwise she could not have made the mark on her day which she did. We know that she wrote a poem on the virtues of St Patrick and a little work called: 'The Quiver of Divine Desires.'

One day on a journey she met a young man called Nindid who was obviously in great haste. She asked him why, and he replied: 'I am hurrying to Heaven.' Brigid retorted: 'Happy is he who goes that journey, pray for me that I may find the way.' This led to a happy acquaintance and she prophesied that it would be he who would give her the Last Sacraments. He took this seriously and ever afterwards he wore a glove on his left hand, the hand

which he considered was destined to perform that service to her. He became a priest. Later on in Rome he was summoned home, naturally or supernaturally, in time to give her the Last Rites.

She was the mother of 13,000 nuns. She died between 521 and 523 which would make her about 72. She was buried at the right of the high altar in Kildare. St Conleth, her coadjutor at the other side; and there she lay for three-and-a-half-centuries. About the year 830 the Danes began to ravish that part of Ireland so St Brigid's relics were brought to Downpatrick. The whereabouts of her grave were for a long time unknown, but in 1185 St Malachy, then Bishop of Down and Conor, prayed for that knowledge and a miraculous light shone on the spot where she lay along with St Patrick and Columcille. In 1186 in the presence of a Papal Legate, Mgr Vivian and fifteen other bishops, the remains of her body were solemnly honoured, but later the tomb was destroyed by the Protestant Reformers. The head of St Brigid was said to have been taken to Neustadt in Austria and eventually to Lisbon.

All the ancient buildings of Kildare have disappeared with the exception of the noble round tower which is still there, and which has a height of 136 feet. In it the celebrated falcon of St Brigid is alleged to have lived until the twelfth century, being killed in the time of King John.

Throughout Scotland memorials of her are numerous, but it is unhappily the case of a name without knowledge. The saints of the Scottish Gael are Columba, Brigid and St Michael.

which he considered was destined to perform that service to her. He became a priest. Later on in Rome he was summoned home, naturally or supernaturally, in time to give her the Last Rites.

She was the mother of 13,000 nuns. She died between 521 and 523 which would make her about 72. She was buried at the right of the high altar in Kildare. St Conleth, her coadjutor at the other side; and there she lay for three-and-a-half-centuries. About the year 830 the Danes began to ravish that part of Ireland so St Brigid's relics were brought to Downpatrick. The whereabouts of her grave were for a long time unknown, but in 1185 St Malachy, then Bishop of Down and Conor, prayed for that knowledge and a miraculous light shone on the spot where she lay along with St Patrick and Columcille. In 1186 in the presence of a Papal Legate, Mgr Vivian and fifteen other bishops, the remains of her body were solemnly honoured, but later the tomb was destroyed by the Protestant Reformers. The head of St Brigid was said to have been taken to Neustadt in Austria and eventually to Lisbon.

All the ancient buildings of Kildare have disappeared with the exception of the noble round tower which is still there, and which has a height of 136 feet. In it the celebrated falcon of St Brigid is alleged to have lived until the twelfth century, being killed in the time of King John.

Throughout Scotland memorials of her are numerous, but it is unhappily the case of a name without knowledge. The saints of the Scottish Gael are Columba, Brigid and St Michael.