

Geology, Irish Pirates and St Patrick

My son, Will, and I have just come back from a holiday in Northern Ireland. Will has never been overly bothered about going away, so when he said that he'd really like to see the Giant's Causeway, I booked it quickly before he changed his mind!

Ireland is a beautiful place, both similar and different in equal parts to mainland Britain. The countryside looks pretty much like England, but the coast is a spectacular chain of huge cliffs stretching down to meet the strikingly turquoise Atlantic Ocean. It's a geologist's paradise! According to the information boards, heading down to the Causeway, the coast and Causeway itself were formed by volcanic activity 60 million years ago. It's certainly a place that makes you feel very small and very, very young as a species!

We also visited Armagh (mostly for the Iron Age fort and reconstructed roundhouse), whose twin-spired cathedral of St Patrick is said to stand on the site of the first church in Ireland to be set up by the saint in the 5th century. Being a well-brought-up nonconformist, I don't really go in for saints much, but recent reading about the 5th century and those who wrote about Britain after the Romans left, has made me realise what an interesting person St Patrick was.

He was born in the early 400s into a reasonably well-off British family, possibly in the north of Wales. His father was a decurion (Roman provincial official) and a priest before Roman rule ended in 410. Some time around the age of 16, Patrick was kidnapped from his father's estate and taken by Irish pirates back to Ireland as a slave. As the Romans had never made it as far as Ireland, Britain represented rich pickings for both traders and raiders across the Irish Sea, so kidnapping was not especially unusual in this period. Once there, Patrick spent six years herding sheep for his master, before he was instructed in a vision to escape on board a nearby ship. After three days' sailing and several years traveling through Britain, he eventually made it home. In his later writing, Patrick states that before his capture he had little faith, but that through prayer and the constant presence of God, he was able to endure his captivity and emerged from it a firm believer, who wanted to share his faith with others.

Once home and recovered, Patrick decided to train for the priesthood, possibly even studying in France for a time. Again, a vision inspired Patrick, this time to return to Ireland as a missionary to spread God's word to those who had once enslaved him. From then on, he spent the rest of his life in Ireland, setting up churches, such as the one in Armagh, and eventually becoming a bishop (which is another fascinating story for another time!). Judging by his own writing and later accounts, Patrick's life in Ireland seems to have been both eventful and fulfilling, but what struck me was his willingness to return to the place and people that had made him a slave. God clearly had a plan for him, but I'm sure he wasn't expecting it to involve such a difficult personal journey. I'm sure being a Roman-born missionary was hard enough in the early post-Roman period, without having to deal with the trauma of facing his earlier captors.

The fact that Patrick did just that, and made a success of it, just goes to show that no matter what unexpected, difficult or unusual things God calls each of us to, we can be sure that He will also give us the wherewithal to deal with it. In Patrick's case, he was given a strong faith, a strong personality and the ability to speak and make himself understood by a wide range of different people. Admittedly, it is unlikely that we will have to face Irish pirates or slavery, but knowing there have been, and still are, people in the world who have faced these things with faith and perseverance, shows us that anything is possible, regardless of how unexpected

or difficult it might be. God provides the plan and the resources, it's up to us how we respond to the call.

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