



Fifth Sunday of Lent March 13, 2016 C

- ◆ **Mercy is always a gift; no one deserves it**
- ◆ **St. Patrick's legacy**

Reflecting on today's Gospel (Jn 8:1-11), Fr. Dennis McBride writes:

The story is told of a young French soldier who deserted Napoleon's army but who, within a matter of hours, was caught by his own troops. To discourage soldiers from abandoning their posts, the penalty for desertion was death. The young soldier's mother heard what had happened and went to plead with Napoleon to spare the life of her son. Napoleon heard her plea but pointed out that because of the serious nature of the crime her son had committed, he clearly did not deserve mercy.

"I know he doesn't deserve mercy," the mother answered. "It wouldn't be mercy if he deserved it."

That is the point about mercy: nobody deserves it. Everyone deserves true justice; mercy, on the other hand, is sheer gift. Mercy cancels out wrongs and transgressions—not because a sparkling defense has been found or excusing causes have been skillfully argued—but because that is the free response of the person who is grieved. Mercy does not suggest that the guilty are not guilty; it recognizes the guilt but does not demand satisfaction for the wrong. In all this, mercy reflects the utter graciousness of the one who has been wronged.

Misery and mercy

*In today's Gospel, we have a magnificent story of the mercy of Jesus as he forgives the woman taken in adultery. It is interesting to note that the story is missing from the earliest manuscripts of John's Gospel. **Some scholars argue that the delay in accepting the story as part of the Gospel reflects the difficulty many people had in the ease with which Jesus lets the woman off the hook, an easiness which was totally at odds with the strict penitential practices of the early Church.** If this is true, it reflects an old problem many people had with Jesus and many people have with God: really believing in what Graham Greene has called "the awful strangeness of God's mercy." Does God forgive as easily as that?*

In the Gospel story, the woman is caught committing adultery. If it takes two to tango, it takes two to commit adultery, but the man seems to have had ready access to an emergency exit leaving the woman in the hands of the scribes and Pharisees. These men know the Law of Moses which stated: "If a man has intercourse with another's wife, both must die, adulterer and adulteress, and so Israel is rid of a plague" (Deut. 22:22). The scribes and Pharisees are zealous about the execution of the Law which means the execution of the woman. They are in the moral majority for they clearly have the Law on their side. Thus armed they come to tackle Jesus on the issue.

*Jesus' reaction to all the fuss is to start writing on the ground. But his questioners persist and Jesus responds not by taking issue with the law but by taking issue with the lawyers. When you remember the law but forget what the law is for, perhaps your memory is a little selective. Jesus seems to think that all victims can do with some form of allegiance and he refuses to join this moral majority. Jesus does not say the woman is innocent or argue that adultery should be taken off the books; but neither is he persuaded about the innocence of her accusers. **He asks them to exercise their memories and check their own track record on sin. If any are innocent, they can throw stones. And while they're all having a good think running their own home videos in their heads, Jesus goes back to his writing.***

At least the woman's accusers are honest people for they readily recognize that they are not innocent accusers. So the "procession of unemployed executioners" is led away by the eldest—who is no doubt giving the example of necessity! Of course Jesus doesn't want them just to walk away but to exercise their forgiveness too. Jesus and the woman are left alone. As St. Augustine described it poetically, "two are left: misery and mercy." And the woman hears good news from Jesus: "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

Caught up in forgiveness

When we see that Gospel scene, we can all imagine ourselves in the place of the woman caught in adultery, and probably have no trouble filling in the faces of our accusers who are ready to heave a stone or two in our direction. But that scenario is too easy. The challenge

of the Gospel is not whether we can see ourselves as the woman who is caught in adultery, but see ourselves as the man who is caught up in forgiveness. Can we forgive as readily as Jesus forgives? Or do we dote on people's wrongdoing, reminding them of past failures, and lighting vigil lamps to their mistakes? Can we forgive and leave it?

We spend time wondering whether God can really forgive without hoarding the hurt. God's track-record on forgiveness is clear: he's had lots of practice and he's good at it. How about our track-record?

"Let the one without sin cast the first stone."

In a society and sometimes in a Church where people find it easy to point out the sins and faults of others, the above words of Jesus should be ringing in all of our ears. In judging others we judge ourselves. "Judge and you will be judged. Condemn and you will be condemned" (Mt 7:1-3).

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Saint Patrick

Saint Patrick was born in Kilpatrick, Scotland, in the year 387. His father was a deacon and his grandfather was a priest (in those days we had a married priesthood). At the age of 16, he was kidnapped by Irish outlaws and sold into slavery to an Irish Druid high priest in modern-day County Antrim, Ireland. For six years he tended his master's flocks, praying throughout the day and learning the Irish language, while becoming increasingly aware of Druid beliefs. His year of slavery in Ireland prepared him for his future work as a missionary.

Patrick ran away from his master, Milchu, to Britain, and began working as a missionary in France, where he was eventually ordained to the priesthood. He accompanied Saint Germain for 18 years battling British Pelagianism. It was through a vision of Irish children saying, "O holy youth, come back to Erin, and walk once more amongst us" that Patrick was inspired to return to Ireland, the land of his captivity, and minister to the people there.

Pope Saint Celestine I, based on recommendation by Saint Germain, formally commissioned Patrick to bring the people of Ireland to Christ and gave him the name Patercius, or Patritius, symbolizing his spiritual fatherhood. Ordained a bishop while preparing for his Irish mission, Patrick returned to Ireland in 433, where he first went to visit Milchu to pay for his own freedom. Before he could do so, however, he found Milchu intentionally burning himself alive with all his most valuable possessions so as to avoid Patrick.

By the end of his life, he had consecrated 350 bishops and brought thousands to the faith.

Saint Patrick's Legacy

Patrick died on March 17, 493, at Saul, Downpatrick, Ireland. His life's core work as a missionary is one that has permeated far beyond the small island nation that he adopted as his home and through the centuries to today. The call for a new evangelization, like that of Patrick's, is one voiced by Pope John Paul—and echoed no less strongly by Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis—as a summons to all the faithful lay and religious alike, to be bold missionaries in the modern world. Saint Patrick's life is one that stands as a saintly model to contemporary Catholics on how to live out this new evangelization in a spirit that is ever new and yet ever faithful to Christ and his mission in the entire planet.

While Patrick was a product of the ancient world, his zeal for faith and for bringing people to know the person of Christ intimately is one that emanates today in our everyday lives, whether at the grocery store or at our cubicle. He not only proclaimed Christ's saving message in places where it was welcomed, but he spread faith in a land in which he had literally been forced to serve as a slave. Even after escaping from captivity in Ireland, he willingly returned to spread the message of his beloved, the Savior of the world. He introduced them not only to a worldwide Church but to a dynamic relationship with Jesus, the Church's own founder.

Evangelization today

From this example, it becomes evident that the new evangelization must be lived every day and modeled by people living the Christian life. This puts the duty firmly into our hands, requiring us to reflect Saint Patrick's own practices of intentional prayers, penance, and retreating, in addition to taking charge of being diligent in our own formation through the study of the faith. Thus, when we are confronted with the opportunity to be witnesses to Christ, we can be, as Saint Patrick was, strong and true in our convictions.

This can and should encompass our time at work, in our studies, in fellowship and recreation, and through whatever means we communicate. Although very few of us will be personally commissioned by the pope to serve foreign peoples, we have all been called in a very special way to break open the beautiful mysteries of God the Father, his Son, and their abiding love—just as Patrick did through the simplicity of a shamrock.

Have a blessed week,

