

## **St Brigid, The Irish Chaplaincy's Matron Saint**

It was back in 2011, when at the Irish Chaplaincy, we chose St Brigid as our patron or patroness saint or as some of have said our matron saint.

Our work with Irish prisoners, Irish Travellers and older Irish meant that for us Brigid was and continues to be, an example and an inspiration for what our work is all about.

Brigid of Kildare ("Mary of the Gael"), although she lived some 1500 years ago was a woman well ahead of her time. Far from being a figure consigned to folklore, she emerges as someone who has much to say to us today about such relevant issues as care for the vulnerable and marginalised, church governance, the quest for peace and justice, gender equality, as well as care for the environment and the power of prayer.

And I'm thankful to Gerry, our prison service manager, for the research he has done into the life and legacy of St Brigid which is included in this talk.

St Brigid was born near Dundalk, Co Louth, in 452, the daughter of parents who were baptised by St Patrick with whom she developed a close friendship. Despite receiving many offers of marriage, she became a nun and with seven others settled at Croghan Hill in Co Meath.

Sometime around 470, Brigid moved to Cill Dara (Kildare) where she founded a "double monastery" (one for men and one for women). She ruled over this as abbess. Brigid appointed St Conleth as bishop, and between them they governed the church there through a mutually happy alliance, establishing a practice which was to last for centuries of a double line of abbot-bishops and of abbesses, with the abbess of Kildare as the "first among equals".

Given today's controversies surrounding issues of equality over women priests/bishops, we surely have much to learn from this model of governance in the early Celtic church. On her death 1500 years ago in Kildare she left behind a cathedral city and school that became famous throughout Europe.

Whatever the many legends and myths surrounding her name, Brigid emerges as a strong and gentle woman, a powerful leader, a skilful healer and wise spiritual guide. She has become for many a potent symbol of Christian womanhood, showing us in different ways the feminine face of God.

What makes her particularly relevant for us today is the range of issues she embraced and championed and the manner in which she dealt with them. She was a peacemaker who intervened in disputes and brought about healing and reconciliation. One story tells of her giving away her father's precious sword to a poor man so that he could barter for food to feed his family, thus transforming a weapon of war into a life-giving instrument. She practised hospitality and had a special concern for the poor and marginalised.

In Brigid's life the active and contemplative lived in harmony. She was no stranger to hard work and there are stories of her milking cows, shepherding her sheep, helping with the harvest and even brewing the ale!

Our former CEO Eddie who is kindly providing our music today, relates the story of the legend that when she was working in a leper colony Brigid was horrified to discover that they had run out of beer.

In those days, beer was much weaker and was drunk throughout the day by children and adults alike since it was both safe from contamination (unlike water, the drinking of which could be fatal) and nutritious. Therefore, running out of beer was serious indeed. Brigid called upon a little divine intervention and succeeded in turning the bathwater used by the lepers into beer. And it wasn't just any old beer, it was a truly brilliant ale. It is said that when a group of priests was visiting the leper colony, Brigid turned the dirty bathwater into beer for them too. And another time, she ensured that a sole barrel of beer was enough to supply eighteen churches from Holy Thursday till the end of Easter.

But Brigid was also a woman of contemplation, given to long hours of prayerful reflection from which she drew her spiritual strength, confidence and courage.

In keeping with Celtic traditions of her time, Brigid was wonderfully attuned to the seasons and cycles of nature. Today, many individuals and groups concerned about the environment and our treatment of the planet, draw inspiration from the reverence and respect which she had for the wonder of creation. In so many ways, Brigid was centuries ahead of her time!

Far from being a figure lost in the mists of folklore and myths, St Brigid, the patroness of Ireland, is a saint whose life has relevance and inspiration for us today as we confront the great issues in our society and our world. Truly, a woman who is a fitting patroness of The Irish Chaplaincy as well as of this church and a woman truly ahead of her time.

**Paul Raymond, Manager, Seniors Project**

**February 2024**