

# **Sermon on Wednesday 17 March 2021**

## **by Rev. Bill Church**

*Readings: Isaiah 49. 1-6; Luke 10. 1-9*

Today is the feast of St Patrick, Patron Saint of Ireland.

Nations seem to be quite open-minded about their Patron Saints: The Patron Saint of England, George, was a Roman soldier based in Palestine. The Patron Saint of Scotland, Andrew, was a Galilean fisherman. The Patron Saint of Luxembourg, Willibrord, was English.

The Patron Saint of Ireland, Patrick, was British, born and raised a Christian toward the end of Roman rule in Britain. As a boy he was kidnapped and taken to Ireland as a slave. He escaped, became a monk, returned to Ireland, invigorated the small church there, established his bishopric at Armagh and died at a good old age. By then, waves of heathen invaders, who were to become the English, had almost snuffed out the church in the country where Patrick had been raised.

We talk about the fire of the Holy Spirit, and like fire, the Christian faith can burn brightly or smoulder as embers. Bright faith can throw off sparks which start new fires. Smouldering embers of faith can be blown upon and revived.

The faith which Patrick encouraged inspired Columba to evangelise south western Scotland and found a monastery at Iona. From Iona, Aidan founded a monastery on Lindisfarne which played so great a part in fostering Christianity in Northumbria. From Lindisfarne, Cedd carried the faith to Essex, founding

monasteries on the site of Othona, a Roman coastal fort, and at Tilbury.

When more English had become Christian, missionaries went out: Wynfrith (better known as Boniface) to Germany, and Willibrord to Holland and Luxembourg; and many others.

That all seems like a romp through history, but look at today.

There is a lot of pessimism around in our country right now: Will congregations come back to church after lockdown? Can parishes survive? Why does popular culture seem so hostile to faith? We, here, often look more like embers than sparks and Christianity has nearly disappeared from much of its original homeland in the Middle East.

But in other parts of the world, Christianity, in many forms, flourishes in Africa.

In South Korea, from an insignificant minority in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, Christians are about one third of the population.

In China, the first Christians were Nestorians active from the very early days into the Middle Ages, but none of them remain.

19<sup>th</sup> Century Protestant missionaries in China at first made so little apparent progress that they must often have felt, like Isaiah in today's reading: "I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing". But today, despite strong official discouragement, and though numbers are debated, there must be more active Christians in China than there are in Britain.

The faith is sometimes likened to an Olympic torch, passed from runner to runner, or to fire running through undergrowth moving from place to place, or sunlight reflected on the sea, always there and always changing.

Faith, too, is always there but always moving on. We need people like Patrick and Columba and Cedd and Boniface and we need to be like them, to blow on the embers and to spread the sparks.