

**A Trinity of Celtic Saints A Reflection for St Patrick`s Day, March 17 2024
Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON Rev Steve Clifton**



March 17 is set aside on our modern calendars as St. Patrick's Day. It's a day to wear green and to celebrate all things Irish. St. Patrick himself is remembered as a legendary figure who chased the snakes from Ireland and who taught the people about the Trinity by means of a shamrock.

Beyond the legends Patrick, was a real person, a Britton who was taken into slavery in Ireland, lived as pig herder in his captivity, who then escaped, returning in time to bring the good news of Jesus to the Irish.

Celtic Christianity emerged from Patrick's work, the gospel interpreted through Celtic language and culture. This tradition found the presence of God in the natural world, and saw the light of God shining in every person. Celtic Christianity was carried forward after Patrick by generations of Celtic holy people. We are going to share a Trinity of Celtic saints with you on this St Patrick's day.

We begin by sharing the first verse of Be Thou My Vision, the words of which come from Patrick himself...

**Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
be all else but naught to me, save that Thou art;
be Thou my best thought in the day and the night,
both waking and sleeping, Thy presence my light.**

St Caiohmen of Glendalough.



My wife's first name is Keva – spelt K-e-v-a. It's an Irish name. My Keva's parents spared her from having years of her name wrongly read out by teachers and used an anglicized spelling of her name; in Ireland Keva is spelt C-a-i-o-m-h-e – Keva.

Consider now an Irish saint whose name is spelt C-a-i-o-h-m-e-n: St Kevin of Glendalough.

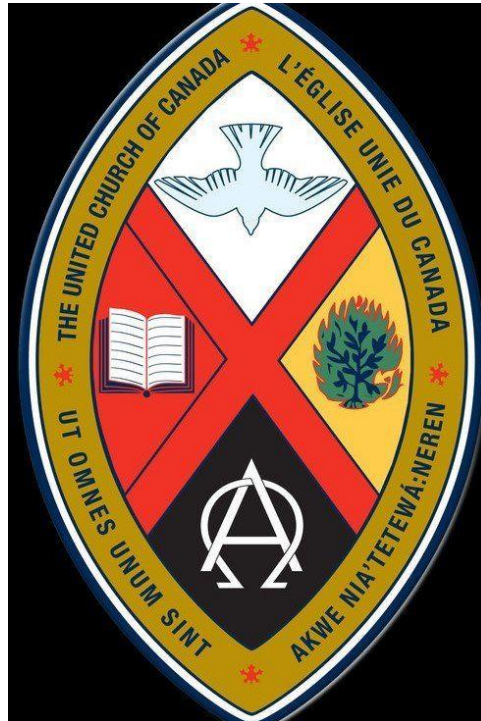
Caiohmen was a monastic and a hermit who made his home in the Wicklow Mountains of Ireland, in a glen with 2 lakes, in Gaelic "Glendalough".



In the 6th Century, he went to live a life of prayer and contemplation alone. He was somewhat eccentric, often meditating while standing neck deep in the icy waters of the lake, next to the cave in which he lived.

Soon other young men were drawn to life by the lakeside with Caiohmen. Later still a vibrant monastery grew. It swelled into a monastic city that stood for 600 years.

Legends about St Caiohmen abound. Many revolve around his love for the natural world and for all God`s creatures in it: he heals livestock, gives shelter to a boar fleeing from hunters, befriends an otter, a deer and a mother wolf. These legends may or may not be rooted in history, but they do speak to the character of this holy man; he lived close to the earth and at peace with its creatures.



On the United Church of Canada`s crest there are words in Mohawk – they translate to “All My relations” - an expression of an Indigenous spirituality which sees the kinship of all Creation. Kevin and Celtic spirituality share this same spirit.



One of the most central stories of Caiohmen of Glendalough, told to capture the essence of Caiohmen, tells of a blackbird landing on the saint's outstretched hand. And in his gentleness Caiohmen watched as the bird built a nest there, waiting patiently over time as eggs are laid and tiny hatchlings are born.



This story is told anew in the poem *St Kevin and the Blackbird* (1996)
 Written by Irish poet and Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney, it begins:

And then there was St Kevin and the blackbird.
 The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
 His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
 As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
 And lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
 Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
 Into the network of eternal life,

Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
 Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
 Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

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Verse 2

Be Thou my Wisdom, be Thou my true Word;
 be Thou ever with me and I with Thee, Lord;
 be Thou my great Father, and I Thy true son,
 be Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

St Brigid of Kildare



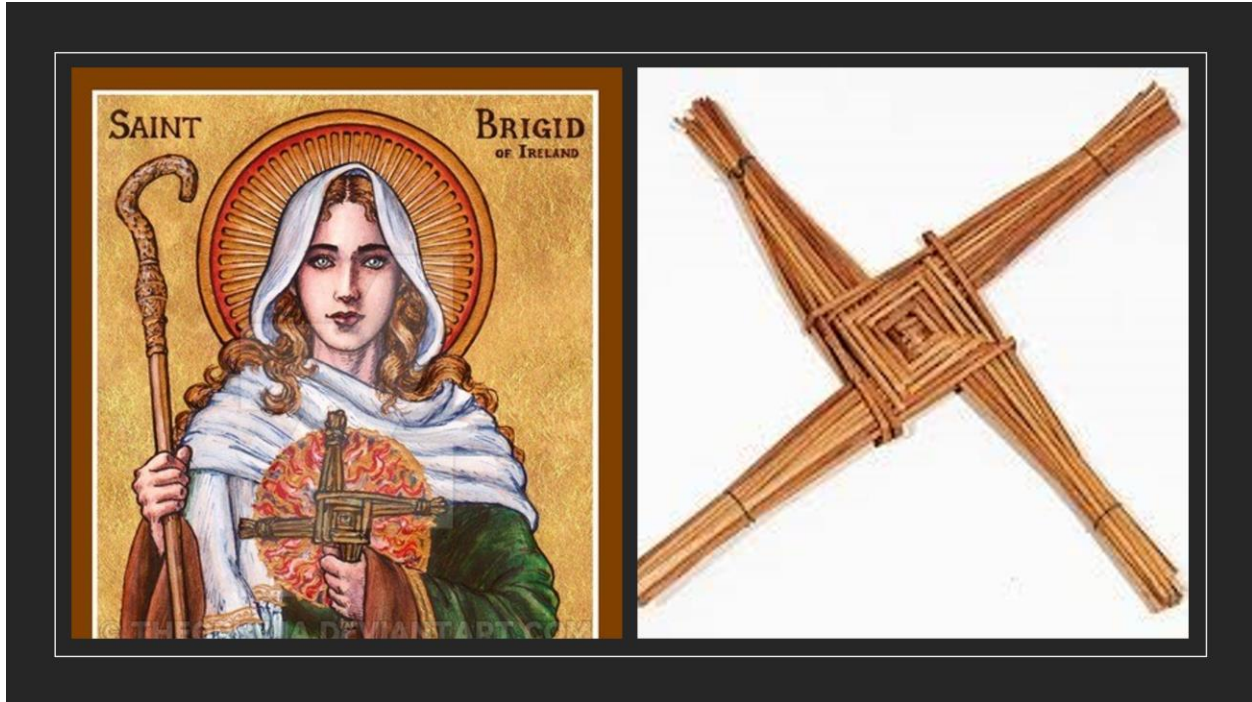
The Biblical narrative and the tradition beyond the narrative is full of great and influential women: Miriam, Sarah, Ruth and Deborah, the 3 Marys of the New Testament, Lydia, Phoebe, Dorcas and Junia...

When we look at the great saints of the Celtic Christian tradition we find strong women, the most prominent of which is Brigid of Kildare. Still held in great esteem in her native Ireland, she has become something of a feminist icon there- and beyond. In Ireland she is known as Mary of the Gael – Mother of the Irish, one of the 3 greatest Celtic saints, along with Patrick and Columba. She is referred to in ancient Irish manuscripts as “one of the *pillars of the Celts*. “



Brigid was born in 453 CE just north of modern-day Dublin and made her name at Kildare; in Gaelic *kil* means church and *dara* means oak- so Brigid is the founder of the church by the oak-Kildare. Today the Cathedral of St Brigid stands on the grounds where Brigid's Monastery was built in the 6thC.

The child of an Irish chieftain and his wife, legend has it that her mother took Brigid to hear St. Patrick preach, and she became captivated by the message of the gospel. She refused to get married, which in her time and place usually meant an arranged marriage for strengthening political and familial alliances, and instead she was determined to devote her life to God.



One of the most well-known stories of Brigid describes how she sat by the bedside of a dying Celtic chieftain, consoling him with her testimony about the power of the Christian faith to overcome death. As she spoke, she plaited an impromptu cross out of local river rushes, a practice many Irish schoolchildren still learn, resulting in the simple, four-armed St Brigid's cross that graces many Irish doorways even now.

Another story central to the Brigid tradition tells of how this holy woman became an Abbess with the status of a bishop. When she was consecrated as a nun the presiding bishop, a venerable old gentleman named Mell of Ardagh, being intoxicated with the grace of God, read the wrong vows from his prayer book. Instead of making Brigid an Abbess, he consecrated her as a bishop. What the Spirit had ordained he would not revoke. She was ordained a bishop and she had leadership over the church in Kildare, and over a dual monastery of men and women.



Another popular story of Brigid is the tale of Brigid and her cloak or mantle. When Brigid first came to Kildare she asked the king for land for her community, by the holy oak in the midst of a great expanse of his most fertile land. He said no. So, she asked if she might just have the land that her own cloak covered. He said yes.

She lay her cloak out on the ground and her sisters in Christ took its corners and the cloak grew and grew until a vast expanse lay under her mantle. All that land became hers... And while the ever-expanding cloak may be a fiction, the reality was that Brigid came to Kildare, became a presiding bishop and Abbess and before long the whole region became devoted to her. The land its people became hers.

Hear now Brigid's name being invoked in this Hearth Keeper Prayer - a daily prayer of Scottish islanders translated and written down in the 19th Century:

Brigid of the Mantle, encompass us,

Lady of the Lambs, protect us,

Keeper of the Hearth, kindle us.

Beneath your mantle, gather us,

And restore us to memory.

Mothers of our mother, Foremothers strong.

Guide our hands in yours,

Remind us how to kindle the hearth.
To keep it bright, to preserve the flame.
Your hands upon ours, Our hands within yours,
To kindle the light, Both day and night.
The Mantle of Brigid about us,
The Memory of Brigid within us,
The Protection of Brigid keeping us
From harm, from ignorance, from heartlessness.
This day and night,
From dawn till dark, From dark till dawn.

Verse 3

Be Thou my Breastplate, my Sword for the fight;
be Thou my whole Armor, be Thou my true Might;
be Thou my soul's Shelter, be Thou my strong Tow'r,
O raise Thou me heav'nward, great Pow'r of my pow'r.

St Brendan the Navigator



Standing at the very edge of his known world, the western most point of Europe, on a mountain top on Ireland's Dingle peninsula, a Celtic monk looked off to the sea. His name was Brendan. Born in this region in the year 484 CE, he is known as Brendan the Traveler, or Brendan the Navigator.

The mountain that Brendan sat upon to contemplate the sea is named after him. Brendan's Creek, not far from the holy mountain, marks the place where tradition says the monk set sail on his voyage into the unknown West.

He and his companions put his *curragh*, a leather hulled ship, into the water and with the rising of the tide set sail over the horizon.

Brendan founded monastic communities, centers of faith and learning, all over Ireland. In addition, he voyaged to Scotland, founding a monastery there, visiting many Scottish islands, travelling to Wales and Brittany too.

But Brendan's real claim to fame comes through what was, in medieval times and for centuries after, one of the most widely read stories in Europe. The Saga of St Brendan tells the tale, the legend, of his travels into the West.

His saga, written by an Irish monk in the ninth or tenth century, was written in Latin and then translated into Middle English, French, German, Italian, and Flemish... The story was much embroidered, blending fact and fiction to create a fantastic tale.



Before setting sail, the saint and his crew of monks prayed and fasted for forty days, and then set off on a voyage which lasted seven years and probably took them to Iceland, to the Faroe islands – this Faroe stamp celebrates Brendan’s coming to their land - and Brendan went on to Greenland and maybe even Newfoundland, all this 1000 years before Columbus, and centuries before the Vikings came to North America.



As the story goes the saint celebrated Easter on the back of a whale and escaped a predatory sea-cat as big as a horse. He visited an island of great sheep – maybe the Faroes... he comes upon an island of flame... think of the volcanoes and hot springs of Iceland... Brendan’s saga is a work in the tradition of Homer's *Odyssey* and draws on Celtic mythology and the Scriptures to tell its tale.

In later life, his voyages at an end, Brendan returned to his work in Ireland and died there at the age of 94.

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In the 6th C, an Irish monk sat on the Western edge of the known world. He looked from what is now Mt Brandon and took in a view like this one. Who knew what lay beyond the horizon?

All of us look into an unknown future. It was four years ago this week that an unforeseen global pandemic arrived with force. It was four years ago this week that our Covid shut down began. Who knew how long and profound this unexpected life disruption would be?

Brendon imagined the unknown that lay before him. Perhaps he knew hope, felt anxious. Unsure. Needed courage. Or direction. Perhaps he felt excitement.

Looking out at this view from the mountain top he looked into the unknown before him and he prayed these words. We might pray them too...

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Help me O God to journey beyond the familiar
and into the unknown.

Give me the faith to leave old ways
and to break fresh ground with You.

Christ of the mysteries, I trust You
to be stronger than each storm within me.

I will trust in the darkness and know
that my times, even now, are in Your hand.

Amen and Amen...

Verses 4&5

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
be Thou mine inheritance, now and always;
be Thou and Thou only the first in my heart,
O High King of heaven, my Treasure Thou art.

High King of heaven, Thou heaven's bright Sun,
O grant me its joys, after vict'ry is won;
Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be Thou my Vision, O Ruler of all.