**Sermon   Epiphany 4 / St. Brigid  Sunday 28/1/2024**

*Deuteronomy 18: 15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13; Mark 1:21-28*

*In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

I was born in the mid 1960s. I grew up in rural Ireland in a country that is very different to our Ireland of today. One of the obvious differences was the public nature of religious belief and worship in the past. Religious institutions were a core part of public life in Ireland. People talked about their parish, attending worship and their beliefs. In the 1960s and early 1970s Irish people were still very familiar with the stories in the bible. They knew the stories and legends about the early Irish saints. There are delightful recordings from the 1960s of young inner city Dublin children talking about characters in scripture and Irish saint lore as if they might walk down the next street. These were used in a series of cartoons called *Give Up Yer Oul Sins* twenty years ago.

That cultural knowledge of scripture and of the lore about Irish saints is no longer common place in Ireland. Our society is now a mix of different cultures, different religious voices and the voices of those claiming that they are not believers in any religion. There is no longer a sense that the early Irish saints, or indeed, the characters from scripture could be walking down the next street. Many people struggle even to name them, let alone tell you any of their stories. These days, the secular celebration of St. Brigid is as likely to focus on a pagan goddess as on a Christian saint. When the bank holiday was introduced in 2023, the focus of public celebration was on naming women who had made an important contribution to Irish society, the goddess Brigid being one of them.

Historians who specialise in this era tell us that they believe Brigid the saint was a real person and did establish a very important and powerful religious centre in Kildare. Part of the challenge for medieval historians of Irish saints and the early Christian era is that we as a society wrote very little down. Instead we told stories and handed those on from one generation to the next. If we lose those stories as part of our cultural heritage, we lose a part of who we are as both spiritual and cultural individuals and society. The same goes for our first language – if we lose Irish, we also lose a key part of who we are.

Secular celebrations run alongside their religious counterparts. We celebrate St. Patrick in a similar way these days with the mix of the public secular events and church services giving thanks for one of our patron saints. I believe we need to get that balance right with St Brigid, given that we as a society have only very recently elevated this saint to being deserving of her own bank holiday. Should we as Christians be concerned to ensure that the Christian saint Brigid is not airbrushed out by a secular focus, such as that of elevating feminist stories of the goddess Brigid and her legacy?

What do we learn from this morning’s readings? In St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians he advised that those who are firm in their faith in Christ can safely eat food sacrificed to idols because they know there is no God other than the God proclaimed by Jesus. He tells them: ‘food will not bring us close to God’. For Paul, it all depends on the strength and depth of your faith. However, he is very concerned about those he calls weak believers. Paul worries that those whose conscience is weak will be defiled by observing those of strong faith eating foods sacrificed to idols. They will not understand the nuance that ‘We are no worse off if we do not eat it, and no better off if we do’. To lead them astray in this way, even though it was done because we were firm in our own faith, is to harm our brothers and sisters in Christ and ultimately to sin against God. Paul advises that he himself will not eat food sacrificed to idols in case it causes one of those with a weaker conscience to lose their faith and to lose their way.

Is there a lesson for us as Christians today from this morning’s readings about how we engage with the secular and religious celebrations of Brigid? I believe that we are called to communicate clearly that we as Church celebrate Brigid the Christian saint. We absolutely accept that we have limited certain knowledge about her but we need to ensure we learn and share the stories of her saintliness because, without our voices, those stories will be lost. It is fine to also enjoy the secular celebrations and the historical and cultural speculation about her. But, we are called to tell out our faith into the world.

Let me finish by noting the rather harsh words of Deuteronomy – if a prophet of God speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. Those of us called to speak as leaders of the Christian faith need to exercise care or due diligence when we speak about faith and about Christian saints. They are not ‘all things to all people’ – from a Christian point of view, early Irish saints like Brigid are faith leaders and examples to inspire and strengthen our own faith. We are called to take seriously our responsibility to share their faith stories with the wider world rather than allowing ourselves to become lost in a post-secular free-for-all. To ignore Brigid’s role as a Christian saint would be to deny our own calling.

*Let us pray*

God of love, we give thanks for the life of St. Brigid and for the stories about her faith and good works that were handed down for centuries. Help us keep those stories alive as part of our diverse and changing Ireland. May the tales of her faith be an example of how we can live to serve you and one another in deep Christian love. **Amen**