

2nd Sunday of Lent – March 16/17, 2019 – Reflection

Aesop's Fables tells us the story of Androclus, the slave of a former Roman consul serving in Africa. The slave longs for freedom and one night runs away from his master's household. In the darkness of the night, Androclus takes shelter in a hidden cave. There, the runaway finds he is not alone; he has chosen for his hideout the den of a wounded lion who roars in pain. Carefully, the slave approaches the beast and sees that the big cat has a paw that he's favoring. A large thorn is lodged in the soft tissue. Fearfully, but with great compassion for another suffering living thing, Androclus removes the thorn giving the lion immediate and immense relief. In gratitude the lion becomes tame towards the slave and going forward, shares his catch with the runaway.

After three years, Androclus longs for a return to civilization and so leaves the safety of the cave. He is soon caught and imprisoned as a fugitive slave. He is sent to Rome where he's condemned to be devoured by wild beasts in the Circus Maximus in the presence of the Emperor Caligula. As Androclus enters the arena for his death, the most imposing of the beasts turns out to be the same lion he cared for. The lion, instead of ripping the slave to shreds, displayed kitten-like affection for him and protected him. The emperor marveled at the spectacle and pardoned both slave and beast. They lived out their days in Rome free where slave could be seen walking with the lion on a thin little leash as the people would shower them with flowers and money.

Patrick, whose feast we celebrate tomorrow/today, was born a free man in the west of Britain, the son of a town councilor who was also a deacon of the Church. His grandfather was a priest, but despite all this, Patrick never showed much interest in religion in his youth. While still a lad, Patrick was kidnapped by Irish pirates who sold the youngster into slavery as a shepherd. Where before his enslavement, Patrick had cared little and thought less about God, now, as he tended his master's flocks, Patrick had hours and hours of time to pass. He began to use the time over the next six years to pray. One night, he was told in a dream that he would soon go to his own country. Shortly after that, he was freed by family emissaries who had been searching for him. With their help, Patrick escaped back to Britain and then made his way to France and maybe even to Rome. He learned a little Latin, enough to allow him to be ordained a priest, and when the Pope appointed an ambassador to be the first bishop in Ireland, Patrick begged to return to the land of his enslavement in the bishop's company. That bishop didn't stay in the wild Emerald Isle for very long and Patrick became his successor. From Armagh, Patrick, despite being woefully undereducated and a poor writer and speaker, by the sheer force of his personality, his fiery devotion to God, and his great love for the Irish people, spent the rest of his life abolishing paganism, idolatry, and sun worship throughout the island. The former slave and fugitive had learned to trust completely in God and a nation trusted their great slave-turned-saint.

In the waters of baptism, we were freed from the shackles of Adam's sin and called to live reborn as the free children of God. How many of us, though, have been captured and enslaved by terrible habits; oppressed and hobbled by the guilt we carry of our thorns in the flesh

that weaken us, pain us, lead us to give up on the hope of ever being truly free again?

"He who knew no sin became sin for us ... He who did not deem equality with God something to be held onto, emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave." If you would be free of your shameful secrets, of the sinful shackles that have bound you for years, Jesus calls into the dark cave of your hiding; calls into the emptiness of your guilt and loneliness and failure; asks you to let Him come close, let Him hear your honest and heartfelt confession, let Him forgive you through the sacraments no matter how long it's been, let Him remove the thorn in the flesh that cripples you, so that you can stand up and walk out of slavery, out of hiding, with Him into the light of the true freedom of the children of God.

The King is willing to pardon you for everything. All you need do is ask from the bottom of your heart: "Jesus, Lord, have mercy on me a sinner."