There is a lovely line in the third Eucharistic prayer where we pray *“in your compassion O merciful Father gather to yourself all your children scattered throughout the world”*. On this our National Feast day, we pray in a very special way for all our emigrants. We also remember that Saint Patrick himself was also an emigrant worker. As we remember our emigrants we pray for them and ask God to bless them and protect them. We pray that they may find happiness in their new home and have the opportunity to use all their gifts and talents wherever they may be and that they will be blessed with friendship and companionship in their lives away from home and family. We also of course remember the immigrants in our own country who have come to our shores to make a new life and especially those who may be experiencing any struggles or difficulties in adapting to their new found home. We remember our Lord's words on the importance of welcoming the stranger; Jesus often comes to visit us in the guise of the stranger. In a real sense St. Patrick was a stranger who brought Jesus to us and to our people.

For many emigrants including St Patrick, the experience can be one of great loneliness and hardship. In St Patrick’s case this led him to turn to God in a way he had never done before. Perhaps we can identify with such an experience in our own lives – when hardship or loneliness or sadness or suffering of one kind or another has visited us and we became more aware of our great need for God. Maybe this experience has led us also to turn to God in prayer in a more real and fervent way. The prophet Hosea speaks of God luring us into the wilderness to speak to our hearts. The harsh treatment that St Patrick experienced at the hands of the Irish - being treated like a slave, was a wilderness experience for him but it was through all this that he found God -suffering had carved hollows into his soul but the Lord proved abundantly faithful, as he filled those hollow places with an overflowing joy.

As he wrote in his Confessions “when I had to come to Ireland I was tending herds every day and I used to pray many times during the day. More and more the love of God and reverence for him came to me”. (Confessions Paragraph 16) God’s plan was unfolding for him in the midst of his wilderness experience and it was this that taught him to trust God and to be able to say “whether I receive good or ill I return thanks equally to God who taught me always to trust him unreservedly.” (Confessions Paragraph 17) He is echoing St Paul who says that “all things work for the good of those who love God” (Roman 8:28) and again he says “for all things give thanks”. (I Thess 5:18)

Despite his sufferings which included the later trials of rejection - terrible rejection and then the experience of betrayal by a close friend, Patrick doesn’t become bitter or resentful of those who caused him so much suffering – what a tremendous example for all of us and only achievable through a life of deep prayer and closeness to Christ who treated his persecutors in the same forgiving way. Patrick finds himself in the heart of Christ through the piercing of his own heart; the great mystery of suffering in the life of the Christian. ***“Sometimes the only way the good Lord can get into some hearts is to break them.”*** (Fulton Sheen)

Patrick eventually escaped from his captors here in Ireland but then one day he felt the call of Jesus Christ (like Peter, Andrew and the others) to commit himself to sharing Christ’s vision of life with others. Perhaps his greatest witness to being possessed by the Spirit of God was his willingness to accept this call to go to the people who treated him so badly and in this way Patrick too became a fisher of men, and women, among the people of Ireland.

St Patrick’s Day is a day to give thanks to God for our faith and for sending St Patrick to us. It is also a day to reflect on and give thanks for the example of so many men and women who since the time of Patrick have been a light in the darkness for us, who have brought their faith to the ends of the earth, and who continue to inspire us by their example.

Fr. Herbert O’Driscoll uses a wonderful image to explain the structure of the Church. His idea is to look at all of the last 20 centuries as rings of time, or as concentric circles of time.   Today's Christians, in the 21st century, are in the outermost circle, farthest away from the center – which is a Cross. We are brought into the circle, into the faith, in large part because somewhere, somehow, someone in the circle just before ours took us by the hand and said, “Come,” and so drew us in. That is one very important reason why we are here. That person was able to do this for us because someone had taken him or her by the hand and had drawn that person in. And so it went, back through all the centuries until we reach the hands that had actually touched the mark of the nails. In this way, Christ builds his Church.

On this day, we can be proud of our Christian tradition. It is also an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to the Lord and his values. As we give thanks for our Christian past we also pray for a Christian future.

Fr James Mc Donagh