

St. Patrick's Day
Liturgy
March 17, 1997
Most Reverend Thomas J. Murphy
Archbishop of Seattle
Homily

Once again we listen to the Word of God that tells us of Yahweh's great love for us. It was Yahweh's love that inspired Patrick to be the missionary, the proclaimer of God's Word to the people of Ireland. We listen to the words of Jesus who tells his disciples that they must preach the Good News to the ends of the world and Yahweh would be with them.

We listen to God's Word as Patrick did. Yet if God's Word is not only to be heard, but also lived, then we must allow that Word to touch our heart and spirit. This morning I would like to share with you how this Word of God touches my heart, especially in light of the culture, the heritage, and the gift that brings us here for this celebration today.

I would like to share with you this morning a reflection on what being Irish means to me as a son of Irish immigrants, as a person who appreciates more than ever before the gift of life that makes me who I am.

What does it mean to be Irish?

To me it means to be part of a culture, a heritage and a legacy that generates faith, pride, and a powerful awareness of a history and a legacy that others have shared with me.

To be Irish is to have the gift of laughter, to see the incongruity of the human condition, and to be able to laugh at who we are and what we do. Yet, no one would dare take the risk to do so unless he or she is also Irish.

To be Irish is to have the ear for the sound of song and music that speaks of hope, love and a constant yearning for the wonders of tomorrow. It is an ear that asks us to hear the story of struggle and hunger, oppression and war that contradicts the peace that is at the heart of the Irish soul. The Irish ear is tuned as well to the sound of words and the powerful stories that tell the tale of the Irish people in their quest for beauty, love, peace and freedom.

To be Irish today is to be aware of the struggles of those who have gone before us. The immigrants of the 1850's and the potato famine would wash an incredible wave of Irish immigrants on the shores of the United States. They would encounter prejudice and poverty, but they would enjoy the gift of freedom. And they would fight for that freedom in service of their new homeland. The Irish would recognize the difference that education makes. Their children would benefit from the sacrifices of immigrant parents who had little education, but they would share this gift with their children. I know this well, for I am one of those children.

The Irish are not a people who remain silent when there is another person of the same heritage nearby. One person of Irish heritage may be an individual. Two people of Irish heritage create a political party. And they did and the Irish have a passion for politics that is part of our genes and our blood.

But the great paradoxical strength and weakness of the Irish is the mournful spirit that springs forth from the poetry, the drama, the stories we dare to tell of our struggles and our hopes, our fears and our dreams. Yes, we are a people of passion and hope, faith and love. We are hesitant to say what is within our soul, except in those dark moments when we face the realities of life and death.

I share these reflections with you this morning because at no time in my life have I been more conscious of my Irish heritage than during these past few months when I have faced the realities of life and death. And what has sustained me? What has sustained me are the same gifts that has sustained those who have gone before me - my faith, my family, the people who enrich my life, and the gift of Irish immigrant parents who not only shared life with me, but shared as well the far more powerful gift of hope in a good and gracious God.

As people of passion and promise, we come here today aware of our heritage and yet conscious of the divisions that separate us because of religious differences. The hatred and violence that have been part of our history because of religious differences contradicts everything within the Irish soul. And so we come today to ask God for forgiveness. We ask forgiveness for the violence we have imposed on one another in Northern Ireland or wherever we contradict the basic challenge of love that must bring us together in Northern Ireland or wherever people use violence to achieve the illusory promise of peace. We must believe and live out the challenge of the Gospel - we are brothers and sisters to one another. To believe otherwise or to do otherwise is to contradict the basic message that Jesus shares with us.

When I visited my parents' home in Kerry some thirty years ago for the first time, I looked out across the rugged coastline and the ocean that stretched out in endless waves before my eyes. The horizon would beckon millions to cross that ocean which became a challenge to the Irish spirit. My parents were among those who made that journey. My mother would speak often of leaving Queenstown, now known as Cove, and wonder if she would ever see home again. But she and my father, like so many other Irish, would always look for what is beyond the horizon. They had a wanderlust that is almost contagious and we are here because of that indomitable spirit.

And so, I come before you this morning with a tremendous spirit of thanksgiving for the gift of life, for your prayers for me, and for the gift of an Irish heritage. I know the struggles of those who have gone before us. I know the dark night of the soul that can hold us captive, and I know the resilience and hope that sustains the Irish spirit. I stand before you today as a fragile human being, but a person who knows that I have been indeed blessed in my life. For I not only know the struggles of an Irish heritage, I also know the blessings. I am a person of faith. I can laugh and cry when I hear the sounds and words of Irish folk songs or the haunting melody of a harp and dulcimer or read the words of Irish poets. I can be a person of passion and pride. But the best way to explain who I am, or who many of us are that are here this morning, is to say that we have inherited a tremendous gift. It is the gift of being Irish and I give thanks.