

Beautiful Donegal, Emerald of Ireland

'So, then, fare thee well, sweet Donegal, the Rosses and Gweedore'.

These are the opening lines of a song made famous a number of years ago by the well-known group, The Emmet Spiceland. These words were on my mind some time ago as Mary, Rebecca and I bid farewell to this place of wondrous beauty. My wife, daughter and I had spent three weeks in the Donegal area and were now heading south to our home in County Tipperary. We had made many new friends during our short stay in Donegal and will always remember the warmth and friendliness of the local people. They really made us feel at home.

'The Boys of Killybegs' was one of the songs immortalised by musician/singer Dermot O' Brien. But perhaps the greatest day in the history of this fishing port was when the President of Ireland, Mrs. Mary McAleese, attended the annual Blessing of the Fleet ceremony on Saturday, 1st August 1998. In her speech the President made particular reference to the work of the Lifeboat Institution. To the north of Killybegs lie beautiful Glenties and Dungloe. A tour of the Atlantic Drive is unforgettable. Sheep Haven Bay, Mulroy Bay and Tranarossan Bay leave lasting impressions on the visitor.

O' Donnell's Castle, situated in Donegal Town, was a hive of activity. Tourists from all over the world visit this ancient fortress, built in 1474 by Hugh Roe O'Donnell. His son, Red Hugh, was immortalised in the song entitled, 'O' Donnell Abu'. This was one of the first songs we were taught in Primary school, back in the 50's.

Our daughter, Rebecca, was particularly interested in the Old Franciscan Abbey, which was also founded in 1474 by the O' Donnells. In fact, they are buried in the grounds of the Abbey. The 'Annals of the Four Masters,' one of the most famous records of Ireland's history, was compiled in the Abbey.

On the road from Laghey to Pettigo we found ourselves travelling through a great expanse of rugged countryside, with wild rolling hills and bog-lands. It seemed to be an area untouched by change. As we travelled this road we saw a signpost pointing to Lough Derg. We discovered that during the Summer months multitudes travel this narrow winding road. For many hundreds of years pilgrims have traversed this roadway as they made their way to the famous Island on Lough Derg. It has been documented that from the 12th to the 15th centuries pilgrims came not only from every county in Ireland but also from Holland, Spain, Hungary, France and England. In the 1950's approximately 35,000 people made the pilgrimage each year.

The dedicated pilgrims spend three days on the island. During that time they abstain from food, except for one meal of dry bread and black tea or coffee each day. They also walk barefoot on rough stones and sharp rocks as they prayerfully encircle the monastic 'penitential beds'. Then a 24-hour prayer vigil begins, during which no sleep is allowed. All of this is endured with great difficulty, but is offered up as Penance for the pilgrim's sins. The pilgrim believes that spiritual Indulgences (merits) can be earned as a result of the sufferings endured during the pilgrimage.

After following the directions on the signposts we eventually arrived at the shores of Lough Derg. We were surprised to see, at the entrance to the area, a large archway bearing the inscription, 'Saint Patrick's Purgatory.' The original name of the place of pilgrimage was Station Island. But this was changed to Saint Patrick's Purgatory during in the 14th Century. Prior to this the doctrine of Purgatory (as a place to which departed souls must go to have

their sins cleansed in the fire of purgation), was non-existent. How any association could be made between Saint Patrick and Purgatory is absolutely amazing, for he did not believe such a place existed in the next life. It is also clear from his own writings (The Confession of Saint Patrick) that the Saint did not believe a person could earn forgiveness of sins through religious exercises, penance, fasting, self-denial, etc.

Patrick had a great love for the Irish and he spent over thirty years ministering to people in many parts of the country. He spent a lot of time in County Donegal and made every effort to explain to the local people the way of salvation. He left them in no doubt concerning the fact that, according to the Scriptures, they were sinners:

'For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard'.¹ Patrick reminded them that 'If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts'.² He showed them in God's Word that all sinners are liable to sin's penalty – "But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."³

He informed them that they could not earn or merit salvation through their own efforts. **'He saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit.⁴ God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it'.⁵ He preached to them the same message that Christ had preached. Jesus said, "And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God."⁶**

Saint Patrick then pointed them to a merciful God who sent His Own Son to die for them. He reminded them that **'Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else?'⁷ "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."⁸ His message from the Scriptures was clear – **'Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.⁹ There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.'¹⁰ Patrick highlighted the fact that salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ. He told the people of Donegal of how Jesus had died upon the cross as a substitute for sinners. By doing this Christ had paid in full the penalty for the guilt of their sins. He called upon them to repent and to put their faith in Jesus. He explained to them that their sins would be forgiven because of what Christ had done on their behalf. He proved from the Scriptures that it is possible to know for certain that your sins have been forgiven. He also proved that salvation is guaranteed to those who are trusting Christ as Saviour.****

Many of the local people, from all walks of life, responded to Saint Patrick's message and were converted. He left a wonderful legacy of transformed and redeemed lives in the county. This is why he is still loved and held in such high esteem by the people of Donegal.

But what about you, dear Friend? Have you believed the message Saint Patrick brought to your ancestors? Perhaps, like so many dedicated Pilgrims, you are depending upon religious exercises, penance, fasting, self-denial, good works, etc. You may be HOPING these will earn or merit salvation for you. But it was never the Lord's intention that people like you should be left HOPING. Saint John writes, **'I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life'.¹¹**

Friend, many people go through life HOPING. Even on their death-bed they are still HOPING they will be saved from the fires of Hell. What a terrible situation to be in when you are facing death, the grave and the judgement seat of God. But today you, as an individual, can KNOW

that your sins are forgiven. You can KNOW that you will go directly to Heaven when you die.
For “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”¹²

Why not call upon the Saviour today? Acknowledging the fact that you are a lost sinner, turn to the Lord in sincere repentance. Ask Him to forgive you and to save you. Then trust Him to do so. He promises that He will.

Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.”¹³

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Scripture References

1: Romans 3 v. 23

3: Revelation 21 v. 8

5: Ephesians 2 vs. 8, 9

7: Romans 8 v. 32

9: Romans 5 v. 1

11: 1John 5 v. 13

13: Luke 19 v. 10

2: 1John 1 v. 10

4: Titus 3 v. 5

6: Luke 13 v. 3

8: John 3 v. 16

10: Acts 4 v. 12

12: Romans 10 v. 13