St Patrick’s Day 2024.

Green beer in the Big Apple. Goose pimples on the arms of majorettes as they parade on the streets of Dublin or Ballina. Leprechaun hats falling over the faces of joyful kids or a 2024 version of St Patrick wearing a green bishop’s mitre; these are many of the images which fill our television screens today and our newspapers tomorrow as we mark our National Feast day. But these images are in fact a far cry from St Patrick, the boy and the man.

We are fortunate in that he has left us his story of his life and how it was lived out in our country. Indeed, we are particularly fortunate here in the diocese of Killala, where he names in his writings the only place in Ireland in which he actually lived. He wrote; ‘I heard the voices of those Irish who live by the woods of Focluth near the Western Sea. They called out to me with a single voice: "We beg you, holy boy, come here and walk among us’. As you may know, the Wood of Focluth was out in Lacken, near the shore  between Killala and Ballycastle.

In a passage from his story, The Confession, he describes himself; ‘So I am first of all a simple country person, a refugee, and unlearned. I do not know how to provide for the future. But this I know for certain, that before I was brought low, I was like a stone lying deep in the mud. Then he who is powerful came and in his mercy pulled me out, and lifted me up and placed me on the very top of the wall.’ I think you will agree. He has much to say about himself which is very different to the pictures of him we see portrayed today. But he also has much to say which is relevant to our lives today. Let me think about two of them.

‘‘So I am first of all a simple country person, a refugee, and unlearned. I do not know how to provide for the future” If he was writing that today he would probably describe himself as a single, teenage male refugee living out in a tent on the shore of the Atlantic, near the Ceide Fields, minding sheep, with no security and no idea of how to provide for the future.’  Sixteen hundred years later that single, simple, unlearned male refugee is our National Saint, emblem of our nation and hosted in almost every country in the world as well as from The White House to Aras an Uachtaran. This surely must say something to each of us Christians, followers in the faith of St Patrick, about how we receive, respect and accommodate the refugees who are now coming to our country, especially the single male refugees.

The second description that St Patrick made on himself was this; ‘ I was like a stone lying deep in the mud. Then he who is powerful came and in his mercy pulled me out, and lifted me up and placed me on the very top of the wall.’ You don’t need me to tell you about how many people in our country feel like  St Patrick did in describing themselves ‘as like a stone lying deep in the mud’. If you were to think about that statement  today you would clearly say that he was suffering from deep depression. In fact anyone suffering from depression would probably say that it was very accurate description of how they so often feel. Then continue with what he says about himself; ‘Then he who is powerful came and in his mercy pulled me out, and lifted me up and placed me on the very top of the wall’ and you would immediately recognise that as the tested philosophy of organisations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, namely that a higher power can help.

When confronted nowadays with all that we hear about the various crises people in general face in our country, I sometimes wonder if our loss of a sense of God in our lives isn’t somehow linked with this. Namely that we fail to see, as St Patrick taught us, that there is a Power greater than us and that we can turn to that Power, to come into our lives; lifting us out of the mud and placing us, as it were, where we want to be, on top of the wall, happy and healthy.

Today our focus will be on the Parades, in Dublin, in Ballina and across the country. Next week our newspapers will be full of photos of all kinds recoding this day. But let us never forget that the man whom we celebrate, who lived sixteen hundred years ago very near us, out in the Wood of Focluth, has a great deal to say about himself which is important for the Ireland in which we live today.

Wish all taking part in parades well today.

In this regard I would like to acknowledge the fact that a Ballina woman, Margaret Timoney, has been chosen as the Grand Marshall to lead the world’s oldest and largest civic parade on St Patrick’s Day in New York City. She is also only the sixth woman to do so in its 263 year old history.

Applause from the Cathedral in which she was baptised is, I think appropriate.