

St Brigid's Christmas

There are many tales told about St Brigid of Kildare. So many that we have no idea how things really were at all. She probably lived in the 5th Century. She was probably the abbess of a double monastery of monks and nuns, by tradition the first monastery in Ireland. She was certainly respected and loved as a holy woman. The stories that tell of her are told in many different ways by many different storytellers. Each of them reweaves the tales in their own ways. This is my telling, my story of Brigid...

Brigid hadn't always been a nun.

She grew up as the daughter of a pagan Irish chief. Her mother was a Christian, but she had been sent away by her father. Brigid held her mother's Christian stories in her heart though, and she wanted to live the life of love and generosity that she saw in those stories. Whenever she came across someone in need, Brigid would give away her own possessions to them – didn't the Gospels say that to serve others was the same as serving Christ himself, that he could be found in those you helped? The only problem was that she really had nothing of her own to give. All she had belonged to her father, and her generosity to every passing beggar infuriated him. "How will I ever find you a husband if you keep behaving like this?" he said. Brigid had no answer, but then, she didn't want him to find her a husband. She wanted to become a nun and live out her faith that way. This was even worse for her father, and he despaired of her.

One day Brigid's father had to visit an neighbouring village for the day. It was a difficult time in Ireland. Famine had struck the land and everyone was struggling to find enough to eat, even a chief. "Brigid, I am leaving you in charge, but you must promise me that you will let no one over the threshold and that you will give nothing to anybody. All we have is on that shelf – a little bread, a little cheese – if you give it away we will have nothing for ourselves." Her father rode off on his horse leaving Brigid alone. But not long afterwards, she saw a young couple coming up the road towards the house. They looked tired – another starving family like so many she had seen. As they came nearer though she saw that the woman was pregnant. She looked close to her time and exhausted. The couple came to the door and looked desperately at Brigid. "Do you have any food you could spare?" said the man. "It's not for me – I don't mind the hunger – but for my wife who is about to have our baby".

Brigid remembered her father's words. She looked at the bread and cheese on the shelf. It was all they had. But she knew she couldn't let this woman go hungry, not with a child on the way. So she invited them in and gave the woman the bread and cheese. She ate some and Brigid insisted she take the rest, wrapped in a cloth. "You need it more than we do," she said. The young couple rested that day with her, but as the afternoon wore on they insisted they must leave and continue their journey. As luck would have it though, just as they set off down the road, Brigid's father came riding back home. He saw the couple, carrying a cloth he could swear was from his own house. And he saw Brigid standing at the doorway watching them go.

He stormed up to her. "Have you disobeyed me? Have you given our last food to those beggars?" "But father, they needed it more than we did." Her father wouldn't listen though. "This is the last straw. Are we to starve because of your foolishness? There is no chance of finding a husband for you when this story starts to spread, as it surely will. You might as well go and found your precious monastery. Go now. I never want to see you again!" And right there and then, in the clothes she stood up in, Brigid walked off down the road. And her father went into the house, and looked on the shelf where the food had been, and to

his amazement, there it was, just as he had left it, in fact he could swear there was more than there had been. He rushed out, but Brigid was gone.”

So Brigid founded a monastery, gathering nuns and monks around her. Years passed, and she devoted herself to looking after all who needed help from the community about her. One night, just before Christmas, Brigid had gone to bed in her cell. She fell fast asleep, but in the middle of the night she was woken by a cry. “Brigid, come and help us!” Surely it must be someone shouting from outside, someone in trouble. She got up, wrapped her cloak around her and stepped out of her cell. But instead of finding herself in the cloister of the monastery she found herself on a strange hillside. How could this be? Down at the bottom of the hill she saw a small stable, with a dim light coming from it. Again she heard the shout, “Brigid, come and help us!”. It was coming from the hut. Brigid hurried down the hill. She pushed on the door of the hut and it swung open. There inside was a worried looking man – it was his voice she’d heard – and his wife who was lying on the bare earthen floor amid the straw. Brigid looked again. It was the couple she’d given her last food to all those years ago. “My wife’s time has come and she is about to give birth. She has no one to help her, no woman to look after her in labour, no midwife to keep her safe. I know nothing about childbirth, and I feel so helpless.” Brigid knew that something very strange was happening - so much time had passed for her, but for them it was as if they had only just left her, but there was no time to ask questions. Brigid had helped many women give birth from her community and she knew just what to do. She reassured the woman that all would be well. She asked the man to find water and cloths. She talked gently to them both and very soon, the woman gave birth to a fine strong baby son. When his mother had fed him and held him and admired him together with his father, Brigid took him from her so that they could rest. Soon they were fast asleep, leaving her with the baby. She took off her cloak and wrapped it round him. It was a plain, ordinary, homespun cloak, but it would keep him warm. And she laid him down in the animals feeding trough – it was all there was. And suddenly Brigid knew who this child was, and who the young couple were too – this was the Christ Child and she had delivered him safely into the world. Brigid was so happy that she began to sing, a gentle lullaby to send Jesus to sleep, and as she sang it seemed to her that somehow all creation was singing with her – the birds and the beasts, all the angels in heaven and the people of earth. The child fell asleep, and Brigid stretched out on the ground and slept too.

But when she awoke in the morning she found herself, not in the stable but back in her own bed, in her own cell in her own monastery. “It must have all been a dream – though it seemed so real and vivid. Still it was a good dream if that is all it was, and I am glad to have had it, for aren’t we all called to bring Christ into the world in the things we do for others.”

And then she got up and went to put on her cloak, which was hung in its usual place on the back of the door – that plain, homespun cloak. But something strange had happened. Woven into the plain brown cloak were threads of gold. And the pattern they made formed pictures all over the cloak, pictures of birds and beasts, and all the angels of heaven and all the people of earth, singing for joy at the birth of their Saviour.

And that’s my tale, and you can believe that it happened if you want to... but even if you don’t it is still a true tale, because whether Brigid delivered the Christ Child in Bethlehem or not, she was right that we are all called to deliver him into the world today. Like Brigid, whenever we come to the help of another we help that little child of hope and joy and peace to be born again. Brigid is known and blessed the world over as the midwife of Mary, but she would have wanted each of us to claim that title too, to bring Christ into the world in the things we do for others – not just at Christmas but all the year round.

Amen