

During the Sundays of Lent, our preachers are focussing upon their favourite prayer.

The prayer that I offer this morning may not be my favourite, but is high on the list: it was sung (in the EH version) at my ordination; it links us to the saints who brought the gospel to these western islands; it sustained me (particularly this version on the notice sheet) during the pandemic; it is appropriate for this coming Friday; and I wanted to choose something that we might pray with Seb on his baptism day, to use in the coming years as we pray for him, and perhaps that he can be taught, at least a portion of it, in his early years.

The prayer, of course, is attributed to St Patrick – known as Patrick’s breastplate, and this version was sung at President Higgins’ inauguration.

It is a prayer which has five aspects.

First, we begin with an acclamation “I arise today”. Often at baptisms, we hear prayers and readings about fallen humanity. Yet baptism is not about falling but about rising. Rising out of the deep waters of death into the new, resurrection life. This experience of new life, freedom and liberation was something Patrick knew well.

A youngster working on the west coast of Britain, he was abducted and trafficked into slavery. His first encounter of Ireland was as a stranger, a foreigner, a slave. But after six years he made a bid for freedom. He rose and fled.

Then we have the vesting passages – it’s where the prayer gets its name from – the breastplate.

But I think we should see Patrick's breastplate as less a shield for offensive battle and more a buckler of defence, the strength and shield of God. Sometimes I like to think of God's armour as protective clothing, enabling us to stand firm in dangerous places.

St Paul has this imagery: a belt of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, shoes of peace, shield of faith, helmet of salvation, and sword of the Spirit.

It's not that this protective clothing will prevent those who have been baptised from having to walk through fire, flood and the valley of death; Seb already knows, that that is part of life, but we face danger in the strength of God, and with God's protection in our inner being.

Staying with the vesting passages. Again, often at baptisms we hear much in prayers and sermons about casting off

old garments, our sinful nature, and wayward ways. But baptism is less casting off, and more putting on, vesting ourselves, better put, being vested in the new humanity.

This putting on of new or different garments is symbolised by the new and smart clothes that Seb, and Ava and Max are wearing today, it's why we often put on our Sunday best, reminding ourselves of St Paul's words, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."

Reclothed, we pray that we might see Christ all around us: above, beneath, at our right hand, at our left...even in mouth of friend and stranger; more than that we pray that friend and stranger might see Christ in us, as they think about our words and actions.

So, the prayer ends with a vow. Opening with the words “I arise today” as a fact and reality of our baptism, it concludes with the invitation to a commitment “I arise today”. We can only make that vow with the help and grace of God, through God’s strength and with God’s wisdom...and I invite you to do it now for Seb.