

ST. BRIDGET



St. Bridget has many ways of spelling her name. Sometimes she is Brid or Breda and sometimes Brigid.

She was born in County Meath but we associate her more with Kildare where she spent most of her adult life.

When she was a young girl she heard St. Patrick preaching so she was amongst the first generation of Christians in Ireland.

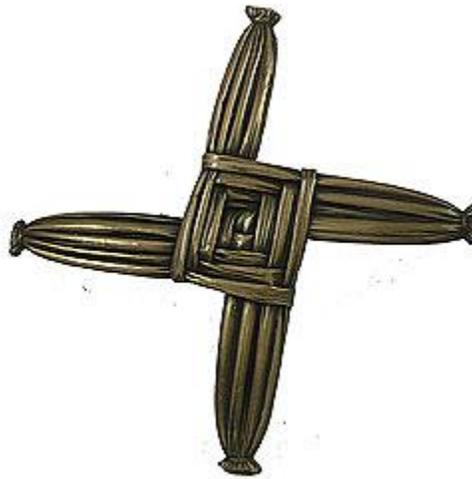
From a very early age she was known for her kindness and generosity.

There is a story that one day she was milking her mother's cow when a poor person came by looking for food. Brigid gave her all the milk which she had in her bucket. Then she started to milk the cow again and filled another bucket when another poor person came by and she gave him all the milk in her bucket. The cow had no more milk and was afraid her mother would scold her. She turned to prayer and by the time her mother came to collect the milk the cow had supplied another bucketful.

When she was old enough Bridget told her parents that she did not want to marry but wanted to live a life given over to pray and to helping poor people. She was sent to a bishop in Longford who is now known to us as St. Mel. He arranged for her to set up a house with some other girls who had the same idea. They were the first nuns in Ireland. Soon Bridget was being asked to open other houses for nuns in different parts of the country.



Eventually she settled in Kildare and a very big settlement of men and women dedicated to prayer and helping the poor grew up there. There were separate monasteries for the men and the women but Bridget was in charge of both of them. In the picture you can see Bridget as a nun in her monastery in Kildare Town. The cathedral there dates back to the time of the Normans and was built on the site of the monastery which she had started.



People came from all over Ireland to talk with Bridget when they had problems and worries. Poor people always received a welcome and were given food and clothing. She also made sure that people received religious instruction. These were early years for the Church in Ireland. There is a story that she was helping an old pagan chieftain who was dying to understand who Jesus was and how he had died on the Cross. She took up some straw from the floor and made a simple cross. You can see the kind of cross which she made in the picture. Even today people like to make St. Bridget's Cross and put it on a wall somewhere in their house. It was believed that this cross protected the house from fire. Each year people would make a fresh cross for her Feastday which falls on the 1st February which for the Celts in Ireland marked the end of winter and the beginning of Spring. Now was the time to plough and to sow seeds.

Bridget was a bit like St. Francis of Assisi who lived much later, because she had a great love for animals. Once while she was still in her father's house she was cooking some meat for him and his guests. A little dog came up to her and she began to pet him. He then lay down and looked at the pot with the meat in it and seemed to say with his eyes that he was hungry. So she took out the meat and cut off a big slice which she gave to the dog. Some people saw this happening but to their amazement, when the meat was taken from the pot again, there seemed to be none of it missing and everyone had enough to eat. There is another story that a certain man was chopping wood and a large chip went flying into the air and killed a pet fox belonging to the King of Leinster. The king was going to punish the man by making him a slave. Bridget was passing by and saw what had happened. In the distance she saw a wild fox and called to him. He came over and Bridget petted him and then gave him to the King. The fox was very tame and playful, so the king spared the man who had accidentally killed the first fox.



There are many stories about St. Bridget which may be only legend but nevertheless they are good tales. One these stories tells how Bridget and some of her sisters were on a journey a long way from home and they came across the castle of the local king. He was away hunting but his sons made her welcome and gave them some food. Bridget noticed harps hanging on the walls. She asked the young men to play some music. The told her that they were unable to play and that the harpists were away with their father, the king. Bridget told them to hold out their hands and she touched their finger with her own. Then she told them to play. To everyone's amazement the harps played music more beautiful than anyone had heard before. While they were playing the king returned and he was more than delighted to hear the music and he made the saint very welcome indeed.



When St. Bridget died her body was brought to Downpatrick in Ulster and she was buried beside St. Patrick. As the years went by the memory of holiness remained and she was held in great honour. Many of the stories told about her may have been invented after her death but this shows us that she must have a great person indeed who had made a great impression during her lifetime. You can visit the tomb St. Patrick in Downpatrick, Co. Down.

