



Saint Brigid and the Wolf

Celtic Christianity - Ireland

Hundreds of years ago, a saint named Brigid built a small hut under a huge oak tree in a place that came to be known as Kildare, in honour of that tree. When she first moved into her home under that oak, it was a quiet, rural place, with a forest and a dandelion meadow and many wild creatures, whom Brigid loved dearly. However, word of Saint Brigid's kindness, generosity and talent for healing spread, and soon many pilgrims were making the journey to Kildare to see her. Some of them came to love Kildare as much as she did and decided to stay. Eventually a village grew up around Brigid's home. Even the King made a pilgrimage to see her, and soon after had a hunting lodge constructed in the forest nearby.

In those days, wolves still roamed the woodlands of Ireland and they were often seen around Kildare. Brigid loved the wolves, just as she loved all the animals of the earth, but the villagers were afraid of them. They were quick to blame wolves when a lamb went missing—and they were often right to do so. Lambs made a tasty meal for a hungry pack of wolves, especially with the King and his hunting parties taking so many deer from the forest.

After a while, the King noticed that the deer were becoming scarce. He was quick to blame the wolves for taking them—and he was often right to do so. The wolves had been feeding on the deer in those parts for hundreds of years. They did not know that these deer now belonged to the King. But the King wanted them punished. He offered to pay anyone who brought him a dead wolf, one gold coin.

Despite the price he had put on the heads of the wild wolves, the King kept a tame one as his pet. He had been given the wolf as a cub by a hunter who had killed his mother, but couldn't bring himself to kill the pup. The King had worked hard to train the pup and was proud of having a wolf who would walk to his heel.

The King often brought this tame wolf with him when he came to Kildare. Unfortunately, one day the King's wolf got loose. He was an amiable beast, used to living with people, so the first thing he did was seek out the village. A woodcutter spotted him heading towards the houses. Not knowing this was a tame wolf and fearing for the lives of the village children, he set an arrow to his bow and shot the poor creature between its shoulder blades. Then, looking forward to his reward, he dragged the dead wolf all the way through the woods to the King's lodge.

By his markings, the King recognised immediately that the wolf was his own beloved pet. The King's grief quickly turned to anger. He told his guards to seize the woodcutter and throw him in the dungeon. Then he sent for the local carpenter and ordered him to build a gallows, which is when the villagers found out what had happened to their friend, the woodcutter.

They went to Brigid to beg for her help.

Brigid was very sorry to hear of the poor wolf's death and of the imminent death of the woodcutter, who had only been trying to do what he thought best. She borrowed a horse and cart from one of the villagers and set off to see the King. As she steered the cart onto the dark road that led through the woods to the King's lodge, she saw, out of the corner of her eye, a white shadow weaving between the trees. The horse began to shy and stumble, snorting with fear, but Brigid said a few calming words and he settled. The white shadow picked up speed and jumped, landing in Brigid's lap. It was a huge, beautiful white wolf with deep, dark, brown eyes and a long pink tongue, which he used to lick Brigid across her cheek, making her laugh.

They made a strange pair as they approached the King's lodge sitting side-by-side in the wagon, the tall white wolf towering over the fair-haired, blue-eyed young woman. The King received the pair in his chambers, staring at the strange wolf greedily. White wolves were as

rare back then as they are now, and the King rather fancied owning one.

Brigid asked if the King would pardon the woodcutter. In exchange, the white wolf had offered to take the place of the King's lost pet.

The King didn't need to think twice. Releasing the woodcutter would cost him nothing and having a huge, white wolf walking to his heel would make quite an impression on everyone he met.

Brigid whispered in the wolf's ear that he was to be a good servant to the King and he would find himself richly rewarded with the best cuts of meat on offer all his long life. The wolf loped willingly to the King's side and laid his head in his lap. The King stroked the great beast's ear, a look of wonder suffusing his face.

Brigid took the woodcutter back to the village. As they journeyed along in the cart she told him:

'It is better that two wicked beasts go free than one innocent one gets punished'.

No wolf was ever killed in that part of Ireland again while Saint Brigid was still alive. □

Adapted by Alette Willis (2017).

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Comments, by Alette Willis

Saint Brigid is one of the most popular saints in Ireland and is comparable to Saint Francis in terms of her concern for the poor and her love of nature. No collection of eco-stories from the British Isles would be complete without her. Stories of Saint Brigid often blend with earlier stories of the Celtic goddess Brigid or Bride, who is associated with Imbolc. Saint Brigid's flower is the dandelion.

This old legend touches on a great many contemporary environmental issues: human encroachment on the habitat of other animals; the problematic interactions that can occur when wild animals become habituated to humans and their food sources; competition between wild carnivores and farmers; the issues of wealthy estates being managed for hunting; and the reintroduction of carnivore species. Saint Brigid's thoughtfulness and kindness towards both people and the animals of this story provide a role model to which we can all aspire.

Sources

- Brown, A. F. (1900). Saint Bridget and the King's Wolf. In *The Book of Saints and Friendly Beasts*. Houghton, Mifflin and Co., which can be found on the Baldwin Children's Literature Project: www.mainlesson.com
- Galbraith, A. & Willis, A. (2017). Saint Brigid and the Wolf. In *Dancing with Trees: Eco-Tales from the British Isles*, pp. 147-149. Stroud, UK: History Press.
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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 2a: Accept that with the right to own, manage, and use natural resources comes the duty to prevent environmental harm and to protect the rights of people.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: The global situation.- The dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental

devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Principle 5c: Promote the recovery of endangered species and ecosystems.

Principle 15a: Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering.

Principle 15c: Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.

