

# Brendan the Navigator



## **Introduction**

The story of St. Brendan and his search for the Delightful Island is very old, and at the same time very contemporary. His challenges are our challenges, and his way of meeting them can give us great encouragement. That's why his story has survived the centuries.

Brendan and his fellow monks give us a feel of how it must have been for Jesus and his Apostles, as they travelled together. Like Jesus, Brendan had to give explanation, direction, encouragement and rebuke. Like the Apostles, Brendan's friends had to learn by experience the way of the Gospel, and in facing many obstacles, to grow into the likeness of their leader.

There are many hidden lessons in Brendan's voyage, which can help and challenge us today. Let's see if we can find them.

## **St Brendan**

St. Brendan was an Irish monk who lived from 484 to 577 C.E. in western Ireland. He was a charismatic leader who was well known for his ocean voyages through northwest Europe spreading the Christian faith and founding several monasteries. The most intriguing of his travels was the account of a seven-year voyage that is chronicled in the "The Voyage of St. Brendan the Abbot" otherwise known as the "Naviagatio" (written in the 10th century).

The legend tells that St. Brendan had heard of the "Land of Promise" and set sail to find it with a number of other monks in a Curragh (a hide covered wood framed boat with sails). He reported reaching several islands, one whose description suggests the volcanoes of Iceland. He eventually reached "The Land of Saints" which many people believe was North America.

## The Navigatio

There is a brief overview of the whole story at the end of this material. It might help to read that first. I have summarised the story step by step, and included the lessons we can find and use. I have not included some episodes, which are repeats.

## The Delightful Island

### The story – Father Barrind

Father Barrind arrives and describes a certain island to Brendan:-

‘My dear child, Mernoc, the guardian of the poor of Christ, left me to live the life of a solitary. He found an island near Slieve League, and nearby the Delightful Island.’ Brendan is intrigued by this, and says: - “I have resolved in my heart to go in search of the Promised Land of the saints.” He gathers fourteen Monks to travel with him.

**Comment:** - On the surface, the Navigation is an adventure story, but it resonates with much of the life journey of every Christian. None of us belong permanently on this planet. **“For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”** (Hebs. 13:14) We are journeying, or pilgriming along with Jesus and our fellow believers to our own promised “Delightful Land”, where we will finally be united with the Lord. **“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”** (John 14:3)

Brendan is touched by what he hears from Barrind. Or is he rather touched by the Spirit, intriguing and challenging him to begin a search for fulfillment? Brendan is like the Samaritans, watching, evaluating and then finally:- **They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”** (John 4:42)

But Brendan, like Jesus, doesn't undertake his journey alone. After much prayer, he selects fourteen monks to be with him. Then he is ready to begin. Following Brendan and his Monks will be an enjoyable experience. We are meant to finish up encouraged, and ready for more of our own journey. Let's approach the "Naviagatio" in this positive spirit.

\* The Christian life is a journey, not a car parked in the garage! Let's embrace the changes that we have to face as part of God's goodness to us. He wants us to be mature in Christ, not children.

\* We are journeying to something better. It's an upward path, from glory into glory, leaving behind what has gone, and pressing on to the goal - to take the prize which Jesus has already won for us, and wants to give us. We should be like children going to the seaside – every day!

\* We are in it together. Brendan chose his disciples his friends to share the adventure. Jesus chose his, and he has chosen us. We need each other, and together we can see it through. We are not alone. We have never been alone. We will never be alone. Not only our earthly family, but the great crowd of witnesses journey with us. What fun!

### **The story – building the boat**

The first task was to build the boat for the journey.

"Saint Brendan and those with him constructed a light boat ribbed with wood and with a wooden frame. They covered it with ox-hides. They also placed a mast in the middle of the boat and a sail and other requirements for steering the boat. Then Brendan ordered his brothers in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to enter the boat."

**Comment:** - Brendan wasn't the first boat builder. God gave Noah a similar command, although for a different reason: - **So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood."** (Gen 6:13)

Our journey is not a vague wandering. Noah and Brendan both felt that the Lord was going to go ahead of them. They were preparing for a journey already mapped out for them, even if they didn't know every twist and turns that was to come.

So they made practical and sensible preparation. God is fully aware of the needs of our humanity. He told Elijah that he must eat: - **The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.** (1 Kings 19:7-8)

We must learn from Brendan not to be so spiritually minded that we are of no earthly use! We have human needs and human sensibilities to consider as we journey. Let's not ignore them, but take them fully in hand. Let's build and provision a sensible boat! One more thing from Brendan before we set out. It's a Trinitarian boat! We need to gather the fullness of God to us as we set out, and move always within the total fullness of God – Father, Son and Spirit. St. Patrick can help us here:-

**Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,  
Christ in hearts of all that love me,  
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.**

### **The story - don't be afraid**

Just before they set out, three latecomers arrive and want to go with them. More of them later. So Brendan and his followers put to sea, but after fifteen days of hard travelling, we read "They set themselves to the oars until their strength failed. Then Brendan began quickly to comfort and advise them, saying: "Brothers do not fear. God is our helper, sailor and helmsman, and he guides us. Ship all the oars and rudder. Just leave the sail spread and God will do as he wishes with his servants and their ship."

**Comment:** - Some key things begin to emerge here.

\* **“Do not fear.”** This expression will appear again and again throughout the Navigation, as it does in the Bible. Joshua had to hear it, and so did the disciples and Saint Paul. This expression is a challenge to faith, but primarily an encouragement to stand firm. When God is leading the way, all fears can be overcome.

**Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”** (Joshua 1:9)

**But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”** (Matt 14:27).

**One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. (Acts 18:19)**

Brendan is a true disciple and teacher. The journey is in God’s hands, so he tells his friends to let God have his way. Hoist the sail and expect great things! Our God will not fail us.

The journey is very God-centred and God-led. A good reminder to us as we pilgrim along. We have to be faithful, obedient and determined, but in the end it is God’s journey, so we have to let him lead. Sounds good? It is, but it is also very risky. Who knows where God will lead?

This is, in one sense, the challenge of the whole of Brendan’s journey, and the Christian faith. Fun - but risky! We can’t have one without the other.

### **The story – the island**

The boat comes to an island, but the Monks can find no landing stage, so have to go round three times until they find a safe anchorage. They land and find a house ready and prepared with food and beds. They give glory to God for his provision. However, another theme appears here. Brendan

warns against temptation, and he has one of the latecomers in mind. During the night Brendan sees Satan attacking this brother, so the Saint prays all night for him. After 3 days they set out, and Brendan warns them to take nothing with them. But one of the latecomers has stolen a silver bridle. He confesses, and they all pray for his soul. Brendan expels a demon from him, and then invites him to share in the Holy Communion. At the end he says "Receive the body and blood of the Lord, for your soul will leave your body. But your brother here, who came from our monastery with you has his burial place in hell." The first brother dies.

**Comment:** - There's a lot happening here.

\* Brendan is emerging as a man of insight and power. He is clearly the leader, as Jesus was clearly the leader of the disciples. What we are beginning to see is how it must have been with Jesus and his disciples, and that is one of the wonders of the Navigation. It gives us a wonderful insight into those 3 years with Jesus.

\* Going round the island three times is a timely warning against hastiness. Sometimes we cannot always find the right way first time. Instead of rushing in, we must seek the path with diligence and prayer.

\* The Island had all the provision they needed. God provides to his faithful people- and provides in abundance.

\* Satan attacks. One of the major threats to Jesus came from within his band of disciples. Brendan found exactly the same. The thief reminds us so much of Achan, (Joshua 7) and faces losing his life in the same way, but within a very different framework. Achan shows no repentance, but our latecomer falls down in repentance, and so is delivered from the consequences of his sin. He receives what he could never have expected - heaven! The thief on the cross (Luke 23:40-43) must have felt much the same.

But even as Brendan leads this man to repentance, he warns that there is still more evil around. Another of the latecomers faces a burial place in hell! Trouble ahead!

## **The story – Jasconius**

Having spent some time on the Island of Sheep, Brendan sets sail again. They land on another island, and the Monks begin to prepare food but “the man of God remained sitting inside the boat. For he knew the kind of island it was, but he did not want to tell them, lest they be terrified.”

As they begin to boil their meat, the island begins to move, and the Monks rush to Brendan, who pulls them into the boat, and they begin to sail. The “island” moves out to sea, and it turns to be a great fish - called Jasconius. Fortunately, God had revealed all this to Brendan before it happened, so he could be prepared.

**Comment:** - The relationship between the Monks and Brendan is developing. He is now seen as their guardian, protector, and the one who knows the mind of God. It’s a nice picture, and the same process must have taken place between Jesus and his disciples. The closeness of the relationship changed the nature of the relationship. Now they are one family, with their “papa”, taking on the journey together.

The safe place is the boat - the family of God, where the Lord reveals the dangers to his servant, who can then protect the family - another nice picture.

Jasconius has appeared in the Bible before - as Leviathan and as Jonah’s “big fish.” He appears to be quite benign here, and will appear again.

We see the statement “do not be afraid” again. This crops up regularly in the Navigation.

## **The story - the paradise of birds**

Journeying on to the next island, Brendan discovers a “multitude of birds”. Desperate to know who or what they are, he pleads to God for an answer, and one of the birds gives an answer. They have survived the “great disaster.” They are fallen angels, but God has had mercy on them. They



must wander forever, but on Sundays and holy days they are given bodies so that they can praise their Creator. The birds give Brendan instruction for the rest of his journey. Then the birds, Brendan and the Monks celebrate with the service of Vespers. After a period of time, and a number of events which need not detain us, off they go again.

**Comment:** - The Navigation contains elements of tradition - the fallen angels who get bodies on Sundays and Saints days – of which we have little or no trace. We must expect this in a document as old as this. Key to the story is the worship - which is in the monastic tradition. The whole journey is enfolded in worship - a good lesson for any century, however uncertain the text may be.

### **The story - Ailbe**

Approaching the island of Ailbe, after 3 months of travel, they cannot find a landing place, even after 40 days of going round it. Distressed and weary, they pray, and eventually a small landing place appears. They meet an elder, a Monk, but who will not answer their questions, (This monastery is a silent one, as they will discover.) They eventually come to the Monastery, eat and worship. Lots of worship, and a fiery arrow which lights the lamps and candles. Christmas is celebrated.

**Comment:** - This is a busy part of the story, much condensed here, and lots to learn.

\* Despite their fatigue, the Pilgrims did not just jump in to any point of the Island. They waited God's revelation. This must have been hard, as they were tired. But they were also wise.

\* The failure to find a way onto the island caused the monks much heart searching. We read "Their strength had almost failed because of their utter exhaustion." The pilgrims were tired because of the effort they had put into the journey. We have to put all our effort into God's service, and it will lead us tired and weary. Nothing wrong with that, as long as it leads to the next statement - "When they had persevered for three days in fervent prayer." They didn't give up, or complain.

Sensing that their exhaustion was becoming too great, they prayed. This is a basic message to God's people, but one quickly forgotten. God's work is tiring. When we are tired the answer is - more prayer.

\* Worship is again the focus of their time on this Island. Again and again the Navigation drives this point home. The pilgrims could not worship enough. They looked for every opportunity.

\* There is miraculous provision of food - bread has been provided for over 80 years, and no one knows where the bread comes from. Provision is a constant theme of the Navigation, along with God's protection. The widow's jar and the feeding the 5000 are the antecedents for what happened regularly at Ailbe. Our God is a provider God. We must learn to trust him as Brendan did.

**The jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah. (1 Kings 17:16)**

**The disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand. (Mark 6:43)**

**The story - the soporific well and the coagulated sea.**

Coming to another island, and being short of food and water, the pilgrims drink the clear water, but Brendan warns them that it will make them sleep. Some drink one cup, some two and some three, and sleep for the number of days they have drunk.

Putting to sea, they drift in a coagulated sea. Brendan comments "Ship the oars and loosen the sail. Wherever God wants to direct the boat, let him direct it." On they go, and arrive again at the Island of sheep, meet Jasconius again and the paradise of birds again.

**Comment:** - The Navigation seems to drift around at this point - revisiting places it has been before. That should not worry us. As Brendan says, God can direct the boat where he pleases.

And this is exactly the point. God must be allowed to send us where he wishes. So we revisit places - what is that to us? We do not know the full plan, or how we fit into it. We put the sails up - and leave the rest to him.

This is a message which the Navigation really drives home. Brendan does finally reach the Delightful Island, but by the route ordained by the Lord.

We should also consider this - when was the sea safe to cross? Perhaps Brendan had to put into previously visited islands because the route he was to take was not safe at that moment.

In the end we either let God steer or we steer. There cannot be two helmsmen.

**The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.** (John 3:8)

### **The story - the devouring beast**

After 40 days of sailing, a huge sea beast appears, and the pilgrims “called upon the Lord saying ‘Deliver us Lord, so the beast does not devour us.’” Brendan replies “Do not be afraid. You have little faith. God, who always defends us, will deliver us from the mouth of this beast and from other dangers.” After a while, another “monster” appears and attacks the beast. The first beast is destroyed. They land on an Island, and find part of the beast on the shore, which provides them with food. Brendan shows them where there is water. They remain there for three months, because of stormy seas.

**Comment:** - We are back in the boat with the pilgrims and Brendan, or Jesus and the disciples - it feels the same! Something evil comes out of the sea. We might think of Leviathan, or the storm in Mark 4. Either way, this is a very familiar scene to us. Brendan’s followers react in much the same way as the disciples of Jesus:-

**“Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” (Mark 4:38)**

And Brendan reacts in much the same way as Jesus – with faith.

**He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.**

**He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (Mark 4:39-40)**

What a lovely story this is, the two sets of followers and the two leaders mirroring each other. By now we should be familiar with “Do not be afraid” and the call to trust. If we take nothing else away from the Navigation, these two principles should be very real to us.

### **The story - the island of the 3 Choirs**

The approach an island where there are 3 choirs- 1 of boys, one of youth, one of elders. Brendan prophesies that the second of the 3 latecomers (the first has died) will remain there. When they see the choirs, who were singing, one after the other - “The saints will go from strength to strength and see the God of gods in Zion.” They sang all day, and at evening “a cloud of extraordinary brightness covered the island.” The next day, Brendan and he pilgrims depart, except for the latecomer who stays with the choirs

**Comment:** - This is an Island of worship. The choirs on it sing all day, linking their chants to the monastic hours. The worship brought the cloud of glory to them. We know this cloud well:-

**Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.**

**In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the LORD was over the**

**tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels. (Exodus 40: 36-38)**

**Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mk 9:7)**

Worship is the heart of this Island, and worship is the heart of God's people.

**Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!" The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped. (Rev 5:13-14)**

### **Story - Grapes**

A bird flies by, with a branch in its beak, which proves to have the most amazing grapes, which feed the pilgrims. Then they come to the island and enjoy the fruits and roots of the island.

**Comment:** - Remember Noah? That's the source of this episode. Noah's birds tell him that the land is ready for occupation. Brendan's bird tells him that provision is nearby. If we stay alert, then we too can see the "birds", the hints that God is about to bless us. We must learn to "lift up our eyes." (John 4:35)

### **Story - Gryphon.**

As the pilgrims are sailing, an evil bird - the Gryphon - attacks them. They are afraid, but Brendan says "Do not be afraid. God is our helper. He will defend us on this occasion too." Then the bird that had brought the grapes attacks and eventually kills the Gryphon.

**Comment:** - The pilgrims are slow to learn - just like the disciples! This is not the first time Brendan has had to tell them not to be afraid. Fear is a natural human default position, and in one sense it is part of our protection, but it has no place in the spiritual heart.

We need to build our fearlessness not on personal bravado but on verses like this one from Hebrews:-

So we say with confidence,

**“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?”** (Hebrews 13:6)

**Story - The clear sea. The crystal pillar. The Smiths.**

Brendan was celebrating the feast of St. Peter in his boat! Looking down they saw that the sea was so clear that they could see the fish, and the pilgrims were concerned that the fish would hear and pursue them! Brendan rebukes them “Is not our Lord Jesus God of all fish, and can he not reduce all living things?” Brendan began to worship and the fish circle the boat but then leave. They come across a crystal pillar and on one side a chalice and Patten. Brendan takes these and they sail away.

They come across another island where they hear the sound of a forge. Brendan is very troubled. One of the smiths running the forge comes out and throws a lump of molten lava at them. They sail away as fast as they can.

**Comment:** - As the journey gets closer to its goal, two very contrasting events take place - a taste of heaven and a taste of hell!

The column in the sea gives the pilgrims a taste of heaven. It is beautiful and spiritually satisfying. God’s people need to keep their eyes fixed on heaven, as Jesus did - **“for the joy set before him.”** One of the demonic strategies is to try and force us to look at the earthly places, and the struggles we have to keep going. But if we fix our eyes on heaven, on the prize and the goal, then we gain spiritual strength from there - strength to press on, to live in victory, to overcome, to conquer. “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory.”

The island of Smiths is the complete opposite. This is the hellish place where the demonic finds a home - full of spite, anger, pain and pointlessness. The Smith with the hot lump of lava tries to injure and kill

the pilgrims. He fails but it is a timely reminder that there are alternatives to living in the faith of Jesus. We must also realise that the demonic forces are dangerous, and will destroy us if they can.

### **Story - The fiery mountain.**

Here the last latecomer goes. He jumps out of the boat, crying “alas father I am being snatched from you and am powerless to come back to you.” He is carried off by a multitude of demons to be tormented and set on fire by them. The monks sail away.

**Comment:** - This is very strange to our minds. Why didn't he stay in the boat? Why didn't he cry to Jesus as Peter did? Why was Brendan so powerless? Ultimately, the latecomer chooses to go the way he went. The Navigation does not hesitate to underline the truth that we each have to make personal decisions about our faith and our journey. The responsibility for our soul rests with us, even though we travel in the company of others. This is a powerful truth in a generation which abrogates personal responsibility and is quick to blame others for personal situations.

### **Story - Unhappy Judas.**

The monks come to an island where they see a man on a rock, being battered by the waves. This is Judas, being punished for his sin. He is granted certain days of refuge. He sees the place not as a punishment but a sign of God's grace. He pleads with Brendan for one days rest from demonic torture, and Brendan grants it.

**Comment:** - This is a passage filled with difficulty for us, especially if we are only used to the biblical explanation of Judas. But here we are dealing with the doctrine of purgatory, with its concept of punishment which purifies. Judas is portrayed repentant and accepting that his punishment will lead to the delightful land. The idea of purgatory began with the early fathers. Different theologians have come to different conclusions about it.

## **Story - Paul the hermit**

Paul the hermit has gone 60 years without food. Brendan asks his permission and everyone lands. The hermit tells of his journey - the story of the burial of his abbot the warning from St. Patrick, and his setting off. He landed on an Island. He is fed by an otter. After visiting the island of sheep Jasconius and the paradise of birds again they set out for the promised land of the saints.

**Comment:** - Paul the hermit existed long before the Navigation. He first appears in St Jerome's writing in the 4th century. Ancient texts often have roots in even older ones. Paul is the complete opposite to Judas. He lives a life of asceticism, provided for by God. The same God has provided for Brendan

## **Story: - The Promised land at last**

On the fortieth day a great fog swallowed up their boat. An hour later a brilliant light shone and the boat touched shore. The monks disembarked and found a beautiful land filled with fruit-laden trees. They explored the land for forty days, never coming to the end of it. But on the fortieth day they discovered a wide river, which Brendan said they should not cross. A young man approached and greeted each of them by name. He explained that God had delayed them in finding the Promised Land of the Saints so that they might discover many things along the way. He instructed them to gather up fruit and supplies and to set sail for, he said, Brendan's last days were near. The Promised Land, he assured them, would be made known to Brendan's successors at a time when Christians were being persecuted, so that they might find a new home in peace.

Brendan and the Monks return home, where he dies shortly after arrival.

**Comment:** - This is, at first sight, a puzzling end to the journey. There is none of the sparkle of the Book of Revelation, or of the many poems and stories what have been written since. It all seems a slight anticlimax.



But the secret of the Navigation is not the end, but the journey. We all know our end in the Promised Land is secure beyond the wide river. But how will our pilgrimage change us? How will we deal with the many events which will cross our path? Will we allow each one to deepen and strengthen faith, or will we collapse in faithlessness and despair?

This is the question the Navigation challenges us to answer - in his day, and in ours. His voice echoes down the ages, asking "How have you travelled and what have you learnt? It's a question we need to be prepared to answer.

### **SUMMARY OF THE NAVIGATION**

**For the benefit of readers, I have summarized the story here. For those who want to read the full text, I have found "The voyage of St Brendan" translated by John J.O'meara to be very clear. Do look for a modern translation. Amazon.co.uk is a good place to look.**

One day an itinerant monk named Barrind visited Clonfert and shared with Brendan and his brothers how he and a hermit named Mernoc had undertaken a voyage to the Promised Land of the Saints. Barrind described sailing to a land in the west, where they walked about for fifteen days without needing to eat or drink. Reaching a river, they met a man who told them many things about this strange Land, which, he said, had been there since the creation of the world. He instructed the two travelers to return home, and escorted them back to their boat, whereupon they set sail and returned to Mernoc's monastery. Enthralled with Barrind's tale, Brendan selected fourteen monks from his own community and confided to them his desire to visit the Promised Land of the Saints. After praying and fasting, Brendan and his companions set out for Inishmore of the Aran Islands to seek the blessing of St. Edna. Near a small creek under a mountain now called Brendan's Seat, they pitched camp and built a small wood-framed boat, covered in oxhides tanned with oak bark, and smeared the joints with animal fat to seal them. In the boat they placed supplies for forty days and other equipment. As they prepared to set sail, three strange monks approached them, asking to be taken along. Brendan agreed, but warned

that two of them would endure a hideous end, and that the third would not return from the voyage.

Brendan and his companions sailed westward for fifteen days until they lost their bearings and drifted to an island which looked like a huge rock tower with streams cascading down its cliffs. Finding a small harbor, they landed, and were greeted by a dog which led them to a hall where they found food set out for them. They stayed for several days, and the whole time they were on the island they saw no one, yet always found meals set out for them. After three days, as they boarded the boat to leave, one of the three monks who had joined them went into a fit. A demon leaped from his \*\*\*, and he died. It was then discovered that he had tried to steal a silver platter from the hall.

Their journey next took them to a large island called the Island of Sheep because of the numerous flocks which roamed its hills. They stayed there from Holy Thursday through Holy Saturday. While there, a man known as the Steward provided for them, and gave them fresh meat to take with them. He instructed them to travel to another island to celebrate Easter. Soon after leaving the Island of Sheep, they found a small barren island and landed there. But when they lit the fire to roast some of the meat they had been given, the island began to shake and move, and the monks scrambled back into their boat. They watched as the island moved away, their fire still burning. Brendan informed his monks that the "island" was in fact Jasconius, the largest whale in the ocean. Across a channel from the Island of Sheep the travelers found the Paradise of Birds, with a river leading inland. A mile upstream they discovered a huge tree covered with white birds. At vespers and at other times the birds burst into hymns and verses. One of the flock flew down to the boat and began speaking to Brendan, informing him that he and his companions would search seven years before reaching the Promised Land of the Saints. Throughout their stay on the Paradise of Birds, the Steward brought them food and water and provided for all their needs. When the Feast of Pentecost came, the Steward instructed them to set sail once again.

For many months they traveled westward and saw no sign of island or coast. Finally, just before Christmas, they spotted an island. When they

reached the shore they found a white-haired elder who led them to the nearby Monastery of St. Ailbe. At the door of the monastery they were greeted in silence by eleven monks. The abbot washed their feet and led them to a meal of roots and bread. The abbot broke the silence to explain that no cooked food was ever eaten at the monastery, that the bread was miraculously provided, that their lamps never burned out, and that the monks never grew older. They had been on the island for eighty years, never speaking a word. After the other monks had gone to sleep, the abbot led Brendan to the chapel, where they watched as a fiery arrow sped through a window, touched the lamps at the altar to replenish their oil, and sped out again. When Epiphany came, Brendan and his companions left the Monastery of St. Ailbe and set sail again. They sailed until Lent, without sight of any land, their food and water depleted. After three days without water, they came upon an island where they found a well. But after drinking the water, the monks fell into a deep sleep, some for three days, some for two, some for one. Once they all awoke, Brendan ordered that they leave the island immediately.

Sailing toward the north, they hit a calm and their boat drifted aimlessly for twenty-five days. Finally a wind sped them eastward, returning them to the Island of Sheep on Holy Thursday. The Steward greeted them there, providing them with shelter and fresh clothing. Having observed Holy Saturday, he instructed them to sail off again to observe Easter on the back of Jasconius, the whale, then to proceed to the Paradise of Birds. They did as the Steward said. Again the Steward provided the travelers with food and water while they stayed on the Paradise of Birds. He instructed Brendan that they would repeat the cycle for several years—spending Holy Thursday on the Island of Sheep, Easter on the whale. Easter to Pentecost on the Paradise of Birds, and Christmas to Epiphany with the monks of the monastery of St. Ailbe. The times spent sailing between these islands would bring many adventures.

And so it happened. During one of these times the monks saw speeding toward their boat a huge beast spewing foam from his snout, looking as though it will devour them. The monks cried out in fear, but just as it drew next to the boat a second beast came from the west and attacked the first beast, cutting it into three pieces. Then the second beast swam back the

way it had come. On another occasion a flying griffin attacked their boat, but before it could strike, a large bird dove out of the sky and killed the griffin. One day the companions came upon an island on which they found three choirs---one of boys, one of youth and one of elders. Throughout the day they sang the praises of God. A cloud of extraordinary brightness covered the island from dusk till dawn. When the travelers were ready to leave, the choirs invited one of the three monks who had joined Brendan's company to stay with them on the island. With Brendan's blessing, the monk remained. After this the wind blew them to a rocky, barren island from which came the sounds of hammer and anvil. Filled with apprehension, Brendan and his companions made a valiant effort to row away, but an islander appeared from out of a forge and threw a huge piece of slag at them. It flew over their heads, and when it fell into the sea, the water boiled and hissed. Other islanders rushed to the shore, likewise hurling slag at the boat. The water all around the Island of Smiths steamed like a furnace, and a horrible stench arose. Brendan informed his companions that they were on the edges of Hell.

Soon they were run aground at an island at the base of a huge black cliff. The third of the monks who had joined the band jumped off the boat and began walking towards the cliff, saying he was powerless to turn back. As he reached the cliff, demons carried him off and set him ablaze. Another time they saw a man chained to a pillar of rock, the wind and waves flailing against him. Brendan called out to him, and was told that he was Judas, upon whom the Lord showed mercy by freeing him from his torments in Hell to sit on this rock on Sundays and holy days.

Finally the travelers reached an island where Brendan found an ancient monk sitting at the entrance to a cave. The ancient one told Brendan he had been a companion of St. Patrick and had been a hermit on the island for ninety years since Patrick's death. The hermit instructed Brendan to return once more to the Island of Sheep and once again to the Paradise of Birds, and after that he would be led to the Promised land of the Saints. There he and his companions would stay for forty days, and then be brought safely home to Ireland. After receiving the ancient monk's blessing, the companions sailed off and came to the Island of Sheep where they were once again attended to by the Steward. This time when they prepared

to leave the Steward joined them in their boat. Next they met Jasconius who brought them on his back to the Paradise of Birds. After filling their water vessels, they companions set sail with the Steward as their guide, for, he said, without him they would never find the Promised Land of the Saints.

On the fortieth day a great fog swallowed up their boat. The Steward told them that the fog always surrounded the land for which they had been searching these seven years. An hour later a brilliant light shone forth, and the boat touched shore. The monks disembarked and found a beautiful land filled with fruit-laden trees. They explored the land for forty days, never coming to the end of it. But on the fortieth day they discovered a wide river, which Brendan said they should not cross. A young man approached and greeted each of them by name. He explained that God had delayed them in finding the Promised Land of the Saints so that they might discover many things along the way. He instructed them to gather up fruit and supplies and to set sail for, he said, Brendan's last days were near. The Promised Land, he assured them, would be made known to Brendan's successors at a time when Christians were being persecuted, so that they might find a new home in peace. Brendan and his companions gathered up fruit and, taking their leave of the Steward, sailed out into the fog. They came again to the island of the ancient hermit, and stayed there with him for three days. Then they set sail once again and returned safely to Ireland. The monastery at Clonfert greeted him with great joy, and he recounted to them everything which they had encountered on their journey. Finally he told them of his approaching death, as foretold by the young man. After making everything ready, Brendan received the sacraments, and soon thereafter died among his companions in about the year 570.

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