“Victoria Cross”

One evening as a junior hospital doctor, I was asked to admit an elderly man with pneumonia. I did a history and physical, but when I got to his lower extremities I was greeted with something which reminded me more of a disfigured oak tree than a leg. Scarred and disfigured, this limb had been badly injured at some point in the past.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“I got that at the Dardanelles,” he replied. “Shot overcoming a Turkish gun post. Won the Victoria Cross for that, I did. Sure an’ I’m the last surviving Irish World War 1 VC.”

First awarded in 1856 by Queen Victoria to reward “acts of valor in the face of the enemy”, the Victoria Cross is the highest award for gallantry for service people fighting under the Crown and is analogous to the Congressional Medal of Honor.

At my suggestion, the following day his wife brought the medal into the hospital. I opened the box and there it was. Unassuming. Even dirty. With a purple ribbon and inscribed simply “For Valour”. I held it, transfixed, and returned it to his wife.

As the years passed, I forgot his name, but never his scarred leg nor his proud medal.

A few years ago, my wife bought me a book “Irish winners of the Victoria Cross”. I excitedly sat down and leafed to the section on medals won during the Gallipoli campaign. Four VCs had been awarded there: of these, three died later in the war and the last died in 1936.

Confused that I couldn’t find him, I expanded my search to all WW1 VC winners but none had survived to 1981. I slowly came to the realization that there was no Victoria Cross. The old man may well have been a WW1 veteran, and maybe even a brave and dashing one who was indeed injured while wearing the uniform. Perhaps his country abandoned him as we do so often the men who come back from war to face an ambivalent population. But he wasn’t what he claimed to be.

The story made me think of the times I have tried to convince others that I was something I wasn’t: don’t we all? Maybe it is justifying a lie, or denying an addiction, or thinking we are better than our neighbor. But there is one truth which shines forth from every one of us: we are children of a God who loves us and promises us riches far greater than this world can offer. We are marked at our baptism with a different cross – the cross of Christ – and this is an award we carry forever.