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HOW ENGLAND BECAME CHRISTIAN

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The year 1997 will see the fourteenth centenary of the planting of a Church by Augustine of Canterbury. Discussion of plans to celebrate the event have already been mooted. It is only right that such an event should be acknowledged and celebrated. But the celebration needs to maintain a strict objectivity lest too much should be claimed for it and others more deserving, but less well known, should be overshadowed and forgotten.

Christianity comes to Britain

The exact date that Christianity arrived in the British Isles is not known. There are several theories such as St Paul's later unrecorded missionary travels. The legend of Joseph of Arimathea is only a legend although it has its strong advocates. The fact is that we do not know. What we do know is that Julius Caesar invaded these shores in BC 54 but withdrew. It was not until AD 84 that Britain was administered as a Roman Province in the reign of the Emperor Domitian.

It is most likely that individual Christians arrived on these shores as traders or even soldiers. They bore their own quiet witness to the Lord without establishing a mission or founding a church. The earliest reference to Christianity in Britain is made by Tertullian who wrote in AD 208 of, 'Places among the Britons unapproached by the Romans but subdued to Christ.' The reference is clear but precisely what Tertullian meant is not easy to interpret. From this time, the Fathers mention British Christianity regularly.

The first known martyrdom occurred in AD 304 with the death of St Alban. The tide of persecution was now ebbing and in AD 313 under Constantine, Christianity became the religion of the Empire. British bishops are recorded as attending the Council of Arles AD 314 and possibly the important Council of Nicea AD 325. The British bishops were strictly orthodox during the period of the Arian controversy over the divine nature of Christ.

By AD 410 the Western Empire was in serious disarray with the attacks from the barbarians. The Legions were withdrawn to defend Rome and the Romano-British were left to defend themselves. The Celtic Church was still actively evangelising with a mission under Ninian to the Southern Picts. The Pelagian heresy introduced by the monk, Pelagius now began to trouble the Church and twice help was summoned from Gaul to counter its subversive effects that man unaided is able to turn to God.

The Celtic Mission

About AD 450 the South and East of Britain was invaded by the Germanic tribesmen. This was a part of the migrations of various Teutonic tribes which had attacked and captured Rome. The invaders were pagans worshipping their Teutonic gods. The

Romano-British were defeated although it is very unlikely that all the Celtic people that could not escape were slaughtered. Those that did escape made their way to the west, Cornwall, Wales and Strathclyde. Christianity was obliterated as the conquered part of Britain now became the land of the Anglo-Saxons, an in time England.

About this time, in the mystery of providence, a young Briton named Patrick from the west was captured by pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland. While there, he turned to Jesus Christ in faith. He returned to Britain determined to go back to Ireland to evangelise. He laboured in Ulster from the age of thirty dying at the age of nearly ninety. The hymn, *I bind unto myself this day The strong name of the Trinity*, is his composition. From Ireland the newly converted Irish began to return to mainland Britain to bring the good news of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

One of the best known of the missionaries is Columba of Donegal. Though in many ways a wild man in his youth, he was converted to Christianity. He settled on the island of Iona on the southwest corner of the Isle of Mull to evangelise the Scots. Iona in those dark times became the intellectual light of the west. From there the gospel was taken to Northumbria. In that kingdom, church and state were closely united like Israel of old. Oswald the king, who had received his Christian training in Iona, brought Aidan the missionary from Iona to evangelise Northumbria.

Aidan of Lindisfarne gathered around him a group of devoted young men. Through preaching and teaching they laid the foundation of the Church in the North. Further south in the Midlands, Chadd and Cedd evangelised the Mercian kingdom. When Aidan died on the last day of AD 651, he was followed by Finan who continued his work. When Finan died he was now a rival to the ancient Celtic traditions.

The Roman Mission

The story of Pope Gregory the Great's comment on the young blond slaves from England is well known. He determined to send a mission to evangelise the pagan peoples. His choice fell on Augustine who was prior of St Andrew's Monastery in Rome. Augustine set out in AD 596 and the following year he was received by the pagan Ethelbert, king of Kent. The mission was given every opportunity to undertake the work of evangelising the people. A disused Romano-British church building was granted to them together with land for a monastery. Converts were made and baptised. It was now time for Augustine to be consecrated bishop and the consecration took place in Arles.

Now there were two churches amongst the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. What would the relationship be between the new Roman bishop in Canterbury and the older British bishops? A meeting was convened on the banks of the Severn in AD 603. Gregory made it quite clear that he expected the British bishops to submit to him and to relinquish their traditions in favour of Rome. The British bishops refused and withdrew. Augustine's mission expanded into Rochester and what is now London. In AD 605, Augustine died.

There was further expansion into the north by Paulinus where there was immediate success but with the death of the king, Edwin, the mission collapsed and the people reverted to paganism. It was Oswald and Aidan who revived and restored Christianity amongst that people.

The Synod of Whitby

Two different traditions co-existed side by side somewhat uncomfortably. No doubt, this was inconvenient but it was not great matter when the body of essential doctrine was the same. It was the question of the dates of festivals, in particular Easter, which brought the matter to a head. This was to be settled at the Synod of Whitby in AD 664.

Colman claimed the ancient traditions from the East and related this to John the Apostle. Wilfred claimed superiority by virtue of St Peter as the first bishop of Rome with the keys of the kingdom. It is an interesting reflection how far Christianity had declined for an important matter to be settled on such insubstantial grounds. John's relationship to the Celtic Church is not documented and it is extremely doubtful if Peter was the first bishop of Rome. In any event, the keys of the kingdom are held by Christ alone. It was resolved that the Roman usage would be adopted and Colman and the British bishops withdrew.

There are two questions which we have tried to answer. The first is which missionaries opened the way for the light of the gospel to shine into the dark paganism of the Anglo-Saxons? And the second is why were they successful? Bishop Lightfoot of Durham wrote that, 'It was the power of earnest self-denying lives, pleading with a force which no eloquence of words can command... whatever may be the explanation, the fact remains that Iona succeeded where Rome had failed.'

Rome, to be fair, had some limited success in the South but it was the Celtic Church which evangelised widely and successfully in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Evangelism was key to the Celtic Church's work. Fifty years later it came under the institutional control of the Roman Church under Theodore of Tarsus. It is right and proper to remember the work of Augustine but that work must be set in context with the work of the Celtic monks. Montalambert, a Roman writer says:-

Of the eight kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxon Confederation, that of Kent was exclusively won and retained by the Roman monks whose first attempts among the East Saxons and the Northumbrians ended in failure. In Wessex and in East Anglia the Saxons of the West and the Angles of the East were converted by the combined action of continental missionaries and Celtic monks. As to the two Northumbrian kingdoms and those of Essex and Mercia, which comprehended in themselves more than two thirds of the territory occupied by the German conquerors, these four countries owed their final conversion exclusively to the peaceful invasion of the Celtic monks...

It is right and proper to remember what happened 1400 years ago in Kent but it is also our responsibility to maintain a right historical perspective. Celtic missionaries were in the main responsible for bringing the Gospel to England. We owe more to the labours of Patrick, Columba and Aidan than many appreciate. The Celtic Mission must retain the honour of first place in how England became Christian.

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