

The Gospel comes to Britain

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, Evensong August 13th 2017.

Keynote Bible passages: Isaiah 45.22 – 25, Mark 6.1 – 13

Remarkably it is recorded the gospel came to Britain just over 100 years after Jesus gave the great commission to ‘make disciples of all nations.’ In his ‘History of the English church and people’ the Venerable Bede noted an English king Lucius wrote to the Pope asking to become a Christian. Bede writes ‘This pious request was quickly granted and the Britons received the faith and held it peacefully in all its purity and fullness until the time of the Emperor Diocletian.’

1) First then as we consider tonight’s theme of the Gospel coming to Britain we need to *backtrack in history* to enable a fuller understanding of what developed. The island was first known as Albion. In 60 BC Roman Emperor Julius Caesar invaded Britain. This enabled ‘Pax Romana’, a factor enabling merchants and missionaries to travel safely in the empire, and hence the gospel came to Britain. Year 286 was devastating for Christians throughout the empire, with the persecution of emperor Diocletian. It was in this time Alban was martyred. Then came a time of peace, and Christians rebuilt the ruined churches, made shrines for the martyrs and observed the Christian festivals.

The next thing we need to know is Hadrian’s wall built across the north of England protecting those under Roman rule. In the south from 449 people from the European continent were invited to England. These were the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes – from which developed the Anglo-Saxon culture and expression of the catholic faith. Thus to the south were the Saxon kingdoms. In the centre was Mercia and to the north was Northumbria. The key leadership of the church in the southern kingdoms was Augustine, sent by Pope Gregory in 597. He became the first Archbishop of Canterbury.

2) Celtic Christianity. It was in Northumbria along with the Picts and Scots in now Scotland and across to Ireland that what is known as *Celtic Christianity* developed. That’s important for our theme focus on the saintly leadership of Aidan, Oswald and Chad in the 7th century, all three of whom are observed in our church lectionary in August. Some of the difference between the two was over the date of Easter, and the Celts also had their own emphases and practices. Also the Anglo Saxon was more authoritarian under the Pope. The focus of Celtic Christianity was on creation and natural objects, including holy places. Thus the island of Iona and the Holy Island of Lindisfarne became centres of their practices. Wikipedia suggests Celtic Christianity was ‘more spiritual, more friendly to women and more connected with nature’. It included a time of a number of famous saints in history – Cuthbert, Patrick, Columba, Ninian, Hilda, Wynfrid (Winifred), and David in Wales.

3) Let’s now consider the three – first *Aidan*. He was from Ireland and lived at Iona. From here he was invited by King Oswald to go to Northumbria to help the conversion of his kingdom. He was known as a gentle, humble man who readily won the respect of others. New churches were built and monastic communities established including for women. He established a base at Lindisfarne. He had a great love of learning, was full of energy and enthusiasm and was constantly on the move, always travelling on foot regardless of distance. He would stop and share his faith with those he met along the way. If they were Christians he would inspire

them by his word, to live a good life, to keep a regular prayer pattern, and to be generous. Aidan was known for a number of miracles including prophesying a storm and he gave blessed oil to the travellers and its remembered in the saying to 'pour oil on troubled waters.' And it was so. Bede comments 'it was no groundless fable'. Aidan died in 651 and was buried on Lindisfarne.

King Oswald of Northumbria was born in 602 and became king at the age of 14. But he was forced to flee and went to Iona, where he was converted to Christianity and baptised by the monks of St Columba. After 17 years there he engaged in a battle to retake the kingdom and had a vision of Columba assuring him of victory. On the battlefield he built a wooden cross and the army prayed for victory which eventuated. Oswald then appealed to Iona community for missionaries. He was a courageous king, but was martyred in a revenge killing by the king of Mercia in 661. He was a popular ruler and was canonised soon after his death.

Chad was one of four brothers all of whom were priests. He was a pupil of Aidan at Lindisfarne. But it was a time of ferment in the church in Britain, with the row over Easter, and various customs culminating in the Synod of Whitby in 664. There were some quite acrimonious debates including Wilfrid being scathing of the Celtic tradition as 'of one remote corner of the most remote island.' Thus the Roman order prevailed and Wilfrid became bishop of York. When Wilfrid was away for a period of time Chad was consecrated in his place. On his return Chad stood down and retired to a monastery.

After four years Chad was ordained as bishop of Mercia based at Lichfield, but for only three years as he died from plague in 672. As a disciple of Aidan he very much continued in such humble living. Chad, like Aidan would also pray and read from the Psalms whenever there was a violent storm. In this context he was mindful of the biblical prophecy the Lord would come again with great power and majesty and judge the living and the dead. Thus were the believers to take note and live in 'the holy fear and love we owe him.'

4) What *application* then might we take from the lives and examples of these saints?

i) First, the Collects 'collect', *qualities of living* we could emulate. They speak of 'the gifts of humility, love and holiness of Chad, the 'gentleness, simplicity and strength (of faith) of Aidan. They were to preach the good news, and did so in a quiet unobtrusive way, and so can we in our living and example. The symbolism of getting off the horse to walk alongside people is a genuine way of caring. In that we can be true to our calling and fulfil the commission of Jesus.

ii) Second, the importance of *devotional life*. A foundation principle of the Celtic tradition was of holy practices in holy places. Thus were Iona and Lindisfarne centres of the devotional life. How do we practice ours? St Matthew records Jesus as teaching to 'go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father...' And I'm mindful after Jesus ascended to heaven the disciples met in a room and 'constantly devoted themselves to prayer...', the outcome of which was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the believers. Regular worship in church is an important – being mindful of the gospel writer of the disciples going to the temple to pray '....as was their custom.' We would surely say yes I engage in both. A third aspect and likely less practiced is the significance of having *an extended devotional*

time. Often today it is described as a retreat, or even a quiet day aside. When in fulltime parish ministry I would endeavour to take Mondays as a day of spiritual refreshment, after the busyness of Sunday. I still take Monday likewise, only now it is the time I spend to focus on and prepare prayerfully the theme of the coming Sunday's sermon. An extended retreat time is important, often to get away from one's desk and the computer and the internet. Peter has just been on one. I am looking forward to mine early next month, to a place where there's no internet, phone, or TV.

This doesn't have to be a clergy-only exercise. Spiritual Growth Ministries provides a schedule of retreat-type opportunities. They are well worth exploring. I'm certain those saints of past years engaged mightily in these. The saint's of today, God's people can well do likewise. Or if not a retreat then a holiday.

iii) Thirdly we can link with *connectedness with creation*. That was feature of Celtic Christianity, and increasingly we are engaging in this more, be it in simple wonder and awe, noticing, using our senses of sight, smell, touch, hearing and tasting. Creation provides a wonderful resource and indeed for likely all of us it's a part of our very being. Perhaps then to be like the Psalmist: 'O taste and see that the Lord is good.' (34.8) Ruth and I are practising this – it's so easy to 'multi-task' when eating, - at the same time watching TV or reading Stuff – and when the food is consumed one has not noticed and appreciated it nearly as much as sole focus – '*taste and see*'.

Finally then, the gospel coming to Britain is part of 'us' in the human family. Those saints are our forbears, 'an ensample of godly living' as the prayer book accords. Let us seek to live their qualities and by their example.

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Prayers on the theme

In this hour of this day fill us O Lord, with your mercy, that rejoicing throughout the whole day we may delight in your praise; through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen. (Sarum Breviary – early Prayer Book)

Dearest Lord, be thou a bright flame before me, be thou a guiding star above me, be thou a smooth path beneath me, be thou a kindly shepherd behind me, today and for evermore. Amen (St Columba 521 – 597)

A Celtic blessing

The guarding of the God of life be on me, the guarding of the loving Christ be on me, the guarding of Holy Spirit be on me, every night of my life, t aid me and enfold me, each day and each night of my life.