

## **Lecture 21- The Christianization of Great Britain**

*Gregory the Great to Augustine—“Things should not be loved for the sake of places, but places for the sake of good things.”*

*Bede*

*You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.*

*Matthew 5: 14*

### **Assigned Reading**

*The Story of Christianity*—No reading assignment for this lecture

### **Key Terms**

Patrick, Augustine of Canterbury, Iona, Bede

### **Objectives**

- Sketch the spread of Christianity to and throughout Great Britain on a map of the region
- Outline the life and work of Patrick

### **Class Prayer**

*“May the strength of God pilot us. May the power of God protect us. May the wisdom of God instruct us. May the hand of God protect us. May the way of God direct us. May the shield of God defend us. Amen.”*

*St. Patrick*

*“I should welcome the poor to my feast,*

*For they are God’s children.*

*I should welcome the sick to my feast,*

*For they are God’s joy.*

*Let the poor sit with Jesus at the highest place,*

*And the sick dance with the angels.*

*God bless the poor,*

*God bless the sick,*

*And bless our human race.*

*God bless our food,*

*God bless our drink,*

*All homes, O God, embrace. Amen.”*

*The table grace associated with Brigid of Kildare, a convert of St. Patrick and abbess of a large monastery*

*“Almighty Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, eternal ever-blessed gracious God; to me the least of saints, to me allow that I may keep...even the smallest door, the furthest, the darkest, coldest door, the door that is least used, the stiffest door. If so it be but in your house, O God, if it so be that I can see your glory even afar, and hear your voice, O God, and know that I am with you, O God.”*

*Columba (or Columcille=dove)*

## **The Christianization of Great Britain**

### **I. The First Christians**

A. Britons converted through witness of Christians from the Roman Empire

- B. Anglo-Saxons from the continent drove the Romanized, Christianized Britons north and west
- C. Britons did not preach the gospel to the invaders but “God in His goodness did not utterly abandon the people whom He had chosen” (Bede)

## II. Irish Missions

### A. Patrick’s mission to Ireland

1. A Romanized Briton (5th century)
2. Missionary to Ireland: “The voice of the Irish”—“We beg you to come and walk among us once more.”  
Patrick’s message: “Yes, the Irish would have said, here is a story that answers our deepest needs—and answers them in a way so good that we could never even have dared dream of it. We can put away our knives and abandon our altars. These are no longer required. The God of the Three Faces has given us His own Son, and we are washed clean in the blood of this lamb. God does not hate us; he loves us. Greater love than this no man has than that He should lay down his life for his friends. That is what God’s Word, made flesh, did for us. From now on, we are all sacrifices—but without the shedding of blood. *It is our lives, not our deaths, that this God wants.*” (Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, 141-42)
3. St. Patrick’s Breastplate (modern adaptation: “Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart”)
4. *The Book of Kells*

### B. The mission from Ireland

Patrick brought Christianity to a land which had never belonged to the empire politically—“and he did so to such good purpose that when darkness fell over a great part of W. Europe... the true light continued to burn brightly in the island of saints and scholars and was carried forth from there to rekindle the lamps that had been extinguished.” (F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 383)

1. Columba (521-97) to Iona (Scotland)  
Samuel Johnson in *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*: “We were now treading that illustrious island, which was once the luminary of the Caledonian regions, whence savage clans and roving barbarians derived the benefits of knowledge, and the blessings of religion. To abstract the mind from all local emotion would be impossible, if it were endeavoured, and would be foolish, if it were possible. Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses; whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings. Far from me and from my friends, be such frigid philosophy as may conduct us indifferent and unmoved over any ground which has been dignified by wisdom, bravery, or virtue. That man is little to be envied, whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plain of Marathon, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona.”
2. Aidan (d. 651)—and others from Iona to Northern England (Lindisfarne)
3. Columban (540-615) (and many others) to the Continent  
From *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco: “My islands,” William said again, with tenderness. “Don’t be too harsh with those monks of far-off Hibernia. Perhaps, if this abbey exists and if we still speak of the Holy Roman Empire, we owe it to them. At that time, the rest of Europe was reduced to a heap of ruins; one day they declared invalid all baptisms imparted by certain priests in Gaul because they baptized ‘*in nomine patris et filiae*’—and not because they practiced a new heresy and considered Jesus a woman, but because they no longer knew any Latin... Vikings from the far north came down along the rivers to sack Rome. The pagan temples were falling in ruins and the Christian ones did not yet exist. It was only the monks of Hibernia in

their monasteries who wrote and read, read and wrote, and illuminated, and then jumped into little boats made of animal hide and navigated toward these lands and evangelized them as if you people were infidels, you understand? You have been to Bobbio, which was founded by Saint Columba [this is a mistake; it should read Saint Columban], one of them. And so never mind if they invented a new Latin, seeing that in Europe no one knew the old Latin any more. They were great men.” (pp. 312-13)

#### 4. The Celtic cross

### III. Papal Missions

#### A. Bede (673-735)—“father of English history”

1. *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (5 books from the arrival of Augustine of Canterbury in 597 until 731)

2. Providence and predestination

On May 26, 735, Bede gave away the last of his few possessions and said his farewell: “I have lived a long time and the Holy Judge has provided well for me during my whole life. The time of release is near; indeed my soul longs to see Christ my king in all his beauty.” Sitting on the floor of his cell singing “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,” he breathed his last.

#### B. Augustine

1. Sent by \_\_\_\_\_ (pope 590-604) in 597

2. Established center at \_\_\_\_\_

3. King Ethelbert of Kent converted in 601

4. King Edwin of Northumbria converted in 627

The contrast between their old [pagan] religion and the new faith [Christianity] was expressed very movingly by one of [his] leading men while Edwin was consulting with them in the royal council about the advisability of embracing Christianity. His words, according to Bede, were these: “Your majesty, when we consider the uncertain span of time that is ours, the present life of men on earth seems to me as when a sparrow comes to the house and flies through it quickly, coming in at one door and immediately going out by another, while you sit at dinner with your chiefs and attendants in the winter time. The dining hall is warm from the fire kindled in the midst of it, but hurricanes of rain or snow rage everywhere outside. While the bird is inside the house, it does not feel the wintry weather, but when once the tiny space of light and warmth has been traversed (and that takes but a moment), then it returns from winter to winter and is gone from your sight. So this life of men appears for a brief space; but we are completely ignorant of what has gone before or what will follow after. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought us any greater certainty, I think it is right that we should follow it.”

#### C. Synod of Whitby (663)

#### D. British missions to \_\_\_\_\_

1. Wilfrid (637-709) and Willibrord (657-739) to the Frisians (Belgium/Holland)

2. Boniface (Wynfrith) (680-754) to Germany

### Questions for Consideration

1. Are the Iona cross and the Celtic cross the same thing?
2. Did Patrick write a secular history of the Irish people?

### For Further Study

Bede. *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

This scholar-monk (673-735) functioned “like a medieval Luke to chronicle the expansion of the

kingdom of God in the British Isles from the arrival of Augustine of Canterbury in 597 until the year 731.

Cahill, Thomas. *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*. 1995.

Lively history of the Ireland of St. Patrick and *The Book of Kells*. The New Yorker says: “When Cahill shows the splendid results of St. Patrick’s mission in Ireland—among them, the preservation and transmission of classical literature and the evangelization of Europe - he isn’t exaggerating. He’s rejoicing.”