

The Christianization of Great Britain

Let us join in prayer using the words of Saint Patrick.

“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.”

During the Roman period in British history, the first through fourth centuries, the people of Britain were Christianized. Many converted, or at least heard the Gospel, from the soldiers who came from Rome, from merchants, from women, and from others who traveled up from the Roman Empire to settle in Britain. When the Romans withdrew and the empire began to shrink and fall apart in the fourth century, it left a vacuum in Britain. That vacuum was filled by Germanic invaders, called Anglo-Saxons. The Angles and the Saxons began to pour in. Those people were not Christians. They were still pagans. The old Romanized, Christianized Britons were then pushed into the corners of the country, mainly into Wales, Cornwall, and into the north.

The Christian Britons understandably, but sadly, did not try to evangelize the invaders. That would have been a difficult thing, to preach the Gospel to someone who was taking your land and pushing you away from the place where you had always lived. The Britons did not preach the Gospel to the Angles and the Saxons. The Venerable Bede, the church historian of England, whom I will talk more about later, said, “God in His goodness did not utterly abandon the people whom He had chosen.” That is, God did not abandon the Christian Britons despite their lack of missionary response to the pagan invaders. Neither did God forget the invaders. They too were converted in due time.

Before those Anglo-Saxon tribes were converted, something else happened in the history of those islands, which was quite amazing. We would not have been able to predict what happened. On the fringe of Europe was a large island called Ireland. It was to Ireland that the Gospel went, and it was from Ireland that the Gospel returned to England and even to the continent.

Ireland was a dark land beyond the reaches of Rome. It was outside the bounds of the Roman Empire and never was part of it, just as the northern part of Scotland was never part of the Roman Empire. Ireland was a land in which people worshiped spirits and practiced human sacrifices. It was just about as dismal a place as one could find in Europe at that time. Amazingly, over about a century, it was transformed from that dark and dismal place to an island of saints and scholars.

In God’s providence the person used to bring that about was a man named Patrick. Even though Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland, and Irish people love and respect Patrick, he was not actually Irish. Rather he was English, or maybe even Scottish. He was born on the coast closest to Ireland, not far from the beautiful lake district of England. He grew up as part of a Christian family. It was one of the Romanized, Christianized British families. It is interesting to think that, when Patrick was growing up in that part of England, a Romanized African was living in North Africa—Augustine.

Young Patrick was captured by Irish raiders who periodically came over from Ireland in order to steal what they could and take slaves if they could. Patrick was taken to Ireland as a slave. He was sold in a slave market in Ireland, and he became a shepherd for his master. He spent six years as a shepherd. In his writings he said that he was not very religious until that point, when he started praying. He said he prayed 100 prayers per day and as many at night. He realized that he was in a desperate situation and

needed some help. Eventually he got some help, and he was able to escape from Ireland. He went to the continent via a ship that was taking some Irish hounds there. Eventually, a couple of years later, he made it home to Britain. So this still young British man who had been a slave in Ireland and then escaped was hoping that he would never see Ireland again.

One night, however, he had a dream or a vision. In the dream, an Irish man came to Patrick and gave him a number of letters. He took the letters in the dream and began to read them. One of the letters began by saying, “The voice of the Irish—we beg you to come and walk with us once more.” He had that dream, and in it he had an invitation to return to Ireland where he had been a slave. He said he was stabbed in the heart by that letter and was unable to read further. He tried to forget it, but he could not put it out of his mind. Eventually he realized that it was more than a dream, and he thought it was also more than the voice of the Irish. It was the voice of the Lord calling him to go back to Ireland. He heard the voice of Christ saying, “He who gave His life for you, He it is who speaks within you.” So with that rather dramatic call, Patrick went back to Ireland and spent the rest of his life there.

He preached a new message to the Irish, which was the good news of the God of the “three faces.” That was the phrase He used, which was a reference to the Trinity. It is not the best way to refer to the Trinity. You can sometimes find pictures of one person with three faces, although that is not the proper way to depict the Trinity. It was Patrick’s way of setting forth for very simple people an understanding of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He was also able to preach to the Irish a new message. He not only told them about a new God, but also a new message. It was not a message from an angry Celtic god who demanded human sacrifices, but rather a message from a loving God who Himself provided the sacrifice that was needed for the sins of people. Soon that message began to be heard all throughout Ireland. Patrick said, “We preached it everywhere. We preached it all the way across Ireland until we reached the ocean and we could not go any farther.” So in Patrick’s time, through this man and his followers, the Gospel came to Ireland and converted many of the Irish to Christianity.

We do not have a large amount of writing from Saint Patrick. He tells us that he was a relatively uneducated person. He felt that very keenly. He wished that he had a better education when he became a great preacher and leader of the church in Ireland. He did the best that he could, however, so he wrote slowly and with difficulty. We do have his testimony, his autobiography, and also the lovely work, *Saint Patrick’s Breastplate*, as it is sometimes called. Sometimes *Saint Patrick’s Breastplate* is called *A Morning Prayer*, and sometimes it is called *The Cry of the Deer*. The reason it is called *Saint Patrick’s Breastplate* is that it was the protection that Patrick put upon himself. His faith was his breastplate, and he was able to protect himself from the pagan gods and goddesses of Ireland by calling on what he called “the strong name of the Trinity.”

The most familiar part of *Saint Patrick’s Breastplate* begins saying, “Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me.” That is the famous prayer from Saint Patrick. A modern adaptation of *Saint Patrick’s Breastplate* is sung in the hymn *Be Thou my Vision*, which begins, “Be Thou my vision, O, Lord of my heart. Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art. Thou my best thought, by day or by night, waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.” Someone was inspired to take those words by Patrick and write that hymn. The third verse of that modern adaptation is a very interesting one, which is “Be Thou my battle shield, sword for the fight. Be Thou my dignity, Thou my delight, Thou my soul’s shelter, Thou my high tower. Raise me to heavenward, O, Power of my Power.” In an earlier lesson I mentioned the “power encounter” concept, which is certainly in the writings of Patrick and in the preaching of the Gospel in Ireland.

Patrick began many monasteries. The church in Ireland was organized around monasteries and abbots. It was not like the church in the rest of Europe, with a structure of the pope, archbishops, and bishops. Rather it had monasteries and abbots. When the Irish wrote to the pope in Rome, they wrote to him as the “abbot” in Rome. The monasteries in Ireland often had a high tower, like the one mentioned in the hymn, which was necessary in order to keep a lookout for enemies and danger. When Patrick prays, “Be Thou my high tower,” it is the equivalent of Luther referring to God as a “mighty fortress.”

One of the enduring treasures of the coming of Christianity to Ireland was the establishment in the monasteries of centers for the copying of books, particularly the Scripture. As the Dark Ages began to descend on the continent, the light of learning was kept alive in Ireland by the monks who sat in their small places each day and copied Scripture. They produced some of the most beautiful and significant copies of the Scriptures. For instance, the *Book of Kells*, which is now kept at Trinity College in Dublin, is one of the great treasures of Christianity. The Irish scribes did not merely copy the Bible, but they also did it beautifully with amazing depictions and illuminations of the letters.

The monks evangelized Ireland. They copied the Bible and other books, thereby preserving learning for future generations, as Thomas Cahill reminds us in his book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. That is an impressive title, but it is probably not an exaggeration because the Irish did play that role. They were the saviors of European civilization during the Dark Ages. Not only did they accomplish all of that, but soon the Irish also sent missionaries out to England, to Scotland, and then even to the continent. They preached the Gospel to places where the Gospel had once been known but had been lost for one reason or another. The Irish church became almost at once a missionary church. It was very much like the Korean church in our day. When the Korean church came into existence, it was not long before they began sending out missionaries. The Irish church did the same thing.

The closest land to Ireland was Scotland. Scotland was not evangelized except partially by Ninian, who came in the fifth and sixth century. He was a British missionary trained in Rome, who worked among the people of southern Scotland, called the Picts. That was the Roman name for those people; it meant “painted people,” because they fought with their faces painted in grotesque colors. Ninian was able to come up from Rome through England and into the southern part of Scotland to preach the Gospel to those people. The Gospel also came more permanently to a larger part of Scotland through the preaching of Columba.

Columba was one of the Irish monks. His first name was something like Fox, but Columba means “dove.” We do not know exactly what happened to him in Ireland, but he got into some sort of trouble. It may have been with the church, or with the state, or with both. He was exiled, or he may have exiled himself, from Ireland because of the trouble that he caused. Apparently, leaving Ireland was considered the worst possible fate for an Irishman. Columba was not happy about leaving, but he did not go far. He only went a few miles from Ireland to a Scottish island called Iona. He settled there and built a monastery, very much like a monastery in Ireland. Sometime later he wrote, “Thou to the meek and lowly, Thy secrets dost unfold. O God, Thou doest all things, all things both new and old. I walk secure and blest in every clime or coast, in the name of God the Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost.” So this man learned to be happy wherever he was, because he could be there in the blessing and with the presence of God.

It was from Iona that Columba and his disciples began to evangelize further into Scotland. The Picts were indigenous to Scotland. Interestingly it was the Irish colonists who had come over to Scotland to settle who were called the Scots. So the Scottish people came from Ireland and settled in the land of the Picts. Later Scots would go back to Ireland, and we know those people as Scotch-Irish. There was a

certain interchange between those two lands, which were very close together and were both part of the Celtic fringe of Europe. That tiny island of Iona became the source of missionaries who were going throughout the length and breadth of Scotland. They also went into northern England where they evangelized the Angles of Northumbria. A missionary from Iona who went to England was named Aidan. Out of his work came the famous monastery at Lindisfarne, or the “Holy Isle,” which still exists today as a monastery, although it is more intended for tourists now. You can only get there when the tide is low, because when the tide is high the road is covered. It is an island part of the day and not an island the rest of the time. Lindisfarne was another place where the Bible was copied with beautiful script. It was the beginning of the “Lindisfarne Gospels,” as they are called, which are now in the British Library.

Even from Iona, missionaries went further afield, out to the continent of Europe. Columban, or Columbanus, as he was called in Latin, was not the same man as Columba, but he was also from Iona, and he went into the heart of the European continent. He was part of the first wave of Irish, Scottish, and English monks who left their homelands to cross the channel over the following two centuries to do missionary work on the continent. If you read the modern novel *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, which is a very interesting story, it includes the story of Columbanus and the Irish who went all the way to Switzerland and northern Italy in order to preach the Gospel in those lands. We know where those Irish and Ionan missionaries went because almost everywhere they went we can find an “Iona Cross.” It is a cross that has a circle, which stands for eternity. The cross is God’s eternal plan for the salvation of those who believe. That type of cross is found everywhere in Ireland and Scotland. And these crosses were built throughout the continent, and they can be found in Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. They are often found with pictures carved into the cross itself, illustrating the passion of our Lord.

By this time the Gospel had come from the Romans to the Britons. The Anglo-Saxons then came into Britain and pushed the Britons into the extremities of Wales and the west. The Anglo-Saxons were pagans. In the meantime, a Christian Briton went to Ireland, and Ireland was evangelized. Then Ireland sent missionaries to Scotland, England, and down to the continent. But the pagan Anglo-Saxon invaders created a new pagan civilization. So, a land that had been Christian again became pagan. Just because a country is evangelized, that does not mean it is going to stay Christian. It can revert to paganism or become something else. Because of the power of the Anglo-Saxons in the heart of England, Christianity was pushed to the west and north, and their access to the continent of Europe was blocked. All of that was eventually changed. The mission that evangelized the Anglo-Saxons did not come from the British Christians. Neither did it come primarily from Iona. It came from Rome. It came from a mission that Pope Gregory the Great established by sending Saint Augustine from Rome to England.

Before I talk about that, however, I should mention a man named Bede. We usually call him the Venerable Bede. This man is important because so much of what I am going to describe I would not know, and nobody would know, if it were not for the Venerable Bede. He was the father of English history and particularly of English church history. The Venerable Bede lived in the north of England. He spent his life there writing commentaries and writing history. He was kind of like a medieval Luke. He chronicled the progress of the kingdom of God as it spread throughout the British islands. His books cover the years between 597, when Augustine arrived in England, until 731. Bede died just a few years after that. He was thus able to write about the seventh and early eighth centuries. The themes of his books of history are providence and predestination. God has prepared the way, and God has His people that He has chosen. Yet mixed with a formal Augustinianism was a very Roman Catholic sounding emphasis on the merit of good works. It was not unusual in that period to give lip service to Augustine. Then when it came to describing salvation, however, they tended to sound much more Pelagian, or at least semi-Pelagian, in their theological convictions.

Bede tells the story of people like Augustine. Do not confuse Augustine of Hippo and Augustine of Canterbury. They are two different people. Augustine of Canterbury was sent to England by Gregory the Great, one of the famous missionary popes of the middle ages. Augustine was a prior in a monastery in Rome. Gregory believed that somebody needed to go to England to evangelize the Angles and the Saxons, so he chose Augustine to do that. Augustine set off with some of his companions. It is interesting to read the correspondence between Augustine as he traveled to England and Gregory, because Augustine was not sure he wanted to go. It may not sound bad to us to go to England. Back in those days, however, it was a rough place. For a person from a civilized city like Rome to think of spending the rest of his life among savage people whose language he did not know, and without knowing how he would be treated when he got there, it was fearful. He had the trepidation that many missionaries have when they realize they are on the way and they will have to learn the language and live in a new culture. Gregory, back in Rome, sustained Augustine with a steady stream of correspondence. Gregory did not give Augustine a chance to back out. He encouraged Augustine and told him how important his work was. Gregory should be given much credit for getting Augustine all the way to Canterbury.

Canterbury was one of the old centers of religious life in southeastern England. Augustine reached Canterbury in 597. I cannot describe everything that happened next, although some wonderful things did happen. Some kings were converted through the preaching of Augustine and the others who went with him. King Ethelbert of Kent was converted in 601. Later, after Augustine died, King Edwin of Northumbria was converted in 627. Those two very strong kings who represented both the south and the north of the Anglo-Saxon England were converted to become Christians.

When the Anglo-Saxons became Christians it meant that there were two Christian churches, or two Catholic churches, in England. They were not on very good terms with each other. The older British had their church established by the Romans, and it was made up of the British people who were mostly in the north and in Wales and Cornwall. And there was the newer Anglo-Saxon church, established by Saint Augustine and Gregory the Great. There was much tension between those two churches. The issues that divided them might not seem important to us, such as the date of Easter and how monks should cut their hair. Those issues did separate the two churches and cause much distrust. Many people, both in England and in Rome, wanted to see the two churches brought together. It took a long time because there was so much suspicion. Finally at the famous Synod of Whitby in 663, the Roman and the old English Christians were at last reconciled, and all England came under the control of Rome.

Before ending this story I want to emphasize one more important point, which is the English mission to the continent. There was the Irish mission, which included Patrick going to Ireland, Columba going to Iona, missionaries from Iona going to Lindisfarne, and finally Ionan and Irish missionaries going into the heart of central Europe, planting their Iona Crosses and preaching the Gospel. Then from Rome came Saint Augustine to Canterbury, and from Canterbury the Gospel was preached to the Anglo-Saxons in the heart of England. Among those Anglo-Saxons who were converted, some of them became missionaries to the Netherlands and to Germany. It is interesting how quickly those new churches became missionary churches. The British missions to the continent included famous missionaries such as Wilfrid and Willibrord, who went to the Frisians in what is now modern Belgium and Holland. The most famous missionary was Wynfrith, or his more usual name, Boniface, who went to Germany. He is called the "apostle to Germany." He was the man who cut down the oak tree in order to demonstrate to the Germans that the God of Christianity was stronger and mightier than Thor, the god that the Germans worshiped.

It is interesting and even a little amusing to think of those missionaries and great leaders of the church. Patrick is identified with Ireland, but he was actually English. Columba is a great hero of Scotland, but he was actually Irish. Boniface the apostle of Germany was actually English. That is probably the way it should be. God sends His people into the entire world. National boundaries are not very important in the sight of God when planting and establishing His church.

“Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1).