

Article 1 - Christianity Comes to Britain: The Story of How Faith Took Root

When we gather on Sunday mornings, pray ancient prayers, celebrate the Eucharist, or hear the Scriptures read, we participate in traditions that have been handed down through countless generations. As we begin to explore our history and traditions, questions naturally arise. How did Christianity first arrive in Britain? Who were the first Christians in Britain? Who were the men and women whose faith helped shape the Church we know today?

The answers to these questions take us on a remarkable journey.

The story begins in the Roman Empire, travels along military roads and sea routes, survives the collapse of a civilization, flourishes in remote monasteries, and eventually transforms the islands of Britain, Ireland, and Scotland.

Before Christianity reached the shores of Britain, the land was inhabited largely by Celtic tribes with their own languages, customs, and religious traditions. They worshipped a variety of gods and goddesses associated with nature, fertility, war, and tribal identity. Sacred groves, rivers, and hills often served as places of worship. Religious leadership belonged largely to the Druids, who acted as priests, teachers, judges, and keepers of tradition.

Then, in 43 CE (Christian Era), everything began to change. Under Emperor Claudius, Rome invaded Britain. New towns emerged, trade increased, and Britain became connected to a vast empire. This connection would eventually bring Christianity to the island.

There is no record of exactly when the first Christians arrived in Britain. Christianity probably arrived quietly. A merchant may have shared the faith with a business associate. A Roman soldier stationed on the frontier may have gathered with fellow believers for prayer. The gospel most likely arrived through ordinary people living ordinary lives.

By the third century, Christian communities were well established in Roman Britain. By 314 CE, British bishops were attending the Council of Arles in France, demonstrating that the Church was organized and connected to the wider Christian world.

By the early fifth century, Roman troops were withdrawn from Britain to defend other parts of the Empire. Without Roman protection, Britain faced new challenges from Germanic peoples. The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes began settling in the eastern and southern parts of Britain. As the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms expanded, Christianity disappeared from some regions. At first glance, it might have seemed that the story of Christianity in Britain was coming to an end. In reality, a new chapter was just beginning.

The future of Christianity in Britain depended largely on events across the Irish Sea.

St. Patrick was born in Roman Britain during the latter part of the fourth century. As a teenager, he was kidnapped by Irish raiders and sold into slavery in Ireland. After escaping and returning home to Britain, Patrick experienced a call to return to Ireland as a missionary. Within a few generations, Ireland became one of the great centres of Christian learning and spiritual life in Europe.

The Christianity that developed in Ireland and western Britain is often called Celtic Christianity. There is much to admire about the Celtic Church, which became known for its devotion to prayer, hospitality, learning, and missionary zeal.

One of the most important figures of this period was Columba, who founded a monastery on the island of Iona in 563 CE. Imagine a small island battered by Atlantic winds. There, a community of

monks gathered daily for prayer, worship, study, and work. From this remote location, missionaries travelled throughout Scotland and northern England.

One of those influenced by Iona was Aidan, who established a monastery at Lindisfarne, an island off the northeast coast of England. The Venerable Bede, a medieval monk and historian, tells us that Aidan preferred walking to riding so that he could speak with people along the way. He taught patiently, cared for the poor, and shared the gospel wherever he went.

While Celtic missionaries were active in the north, another mission was taking shape in the south.

According to tradition, Pope Gregory the Great once encountered fair-haired Anglo-Saxon slaves in a Roman marketplace. When he was told they were Angles, he famously replied, "Not Angles, but angels." Whether the story is entirely accurate or not, Gregory became deeply concerned for the Anglo-Saxon peoples. In 597 CE, Gregory commissioned Augustine and a small band of monks from Rome to carry the Gospel to England. Gregory's instructions to Augustine are particularly noteworthy. Rather than destroying local customs, Augustine was encouraged to adapt and transform them for Christian purposes. This approach helped the gospel take root among the Anglo-Saxon peoples.

By the seventh century, Christianity was widespread throughout Britain. Yet differences emerged between the Celtic and Roman traditions, particularly regarding the calculation of Easter and certain monastic customs. To address these issues, King Oswiu convened the Synod of Whitby in 664 CE. Representatives of both traditions presented their positions. After hearing the arguments, Oswiu decided in favour of Roman practice, strengthening ties with the wider Western Church.

Rather than representing a victory of one side over another, Whitby helped create a Church shaped by both traditions. This combination of ancient catholic roots and local adaptation would become a hallmark of English Christianity.

The early centuries of Christianity in Britain left a lasting legacy that continues to shape Christian life today. The Celtic tradition contributed a rich spirituality marked by prayer, pilgrimage, hospitality, mission, and attentiveness to God's presence in creation. The Roman tradition contributed organizational stability, sacramental order, theological continuity, and strong connections with the wider Church. Together, these traditions created the foundation upon which medieval English Christianity would develop.

Christianity came to Britain through a process that unfolded over several centuries. Introduced during the Roman occupation, preserved by Celtic communities, and expanded through missionary efforts, it eventually became a defining feature of the religious life of the British Isles.

The interaction of Celtic and Roman traditions enriched the Church and produced a distinctive Christian heritage. That heritage laid the foundations for the medieval English Church and, ultimately, for Anglicanism itself.