

How Christianity came to Britain

I am probably not alone in having been taught that Christianity came to Britain as a result of the Pope seeing blond slaves in a market place in Rome and when told that they were 'Angles' (i.e. from England), replied "Not Angles but angels" and sent a delegation to England to convert its heathen inhabitants.

In fact it is not clear how Christianity first came to these shores, but it was certainly earlier than this reported incident and was probably through the Roman occupation. The earliest recorded evidence is a description by Tertullian, a leading Christian writer, in about 200, of 'the haunts of the Britons, inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ'. It was among the Celtic peoples in the north and west of what is now the British Isles that the gospel seems to have first spread successfully. However, there is evidence of Christian communities in England from the third and fourth centuries; a church council in 314 had three bishops from Britain; and St. Alban, the first British Christian martyr, died in the early fourth century.

When the Romans left Britain early in the fifth century, Christianity did largely die out in England, but the Celtic church continued in Wales, Cornwall and Ireland, and the monastic communities there sent missionaries to Scotland and north-east England with considerable success. From the middle of the fifth century the Saxon invaders prevailed in most of southern and eastern England and Christianity was largely ousted from these areas.

This is where Pope Gregory and his Angles/angels come in. When the Kentish king married a Christian the Pope saw an opportunity and sent a team of 40 monks headed by Augustine. They landed in Kent in 597 and soon afterwards Augustine baptised the king of Kent, Ethelbert, along with many of his subjects. Canterbury thus became a missionary centre from which Christianity spread, although very slowly at first, and in 601 Augustine was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury.

All was not straightforward, however, for as Roman Christianity, structured, disciplined and based on church congregations, spread north and west and met up with the Celtic monastic, ascetic and more loosely organised brand of Christianity, conflict arose. Augustine's attempts to unite the two expressions of Christianity failed and the Celtic bishops refused to accept him as archbishop. In 664 a synod was held at Whitby to resolve matters, and the Roman church persuaded the Celts to fall into line, including accepting its date for Easter. By the late seventh century the church in Britain was under the authority of Rome, albeit retaining quite a strong Celtic and monastic flavour, and it gradually became organised into the parish system which still exists.

This set the scene for the way the church was to develop over subsequent centuries, some of which we shall hopefully explore on future occasions.