

CHRISTIANITY IN BRITAIN BEFORE ST AUGUSTINE

Fr Richard Whinder

I feel I ought to begin with a disclaimer – I make no claim to be an expert on early British Christianity, indeed I make no claim to be a professional historian of any sort. I have a degree in Mediaeval History from King’s College London and, more recently, what study I have done has focussed on 19th century continental history.

So, as I said, I’m no expert, but on the other hand I do have an interest in history and the early history of Christianity in these islands is particularly fascinating, if difficult, as we shall see.

So, where shall we start?

Here is another disclaimer. In this talk, I’m not going to say anything about **Glastonbury**. In many ways that is a shame. Glastonbury is an ancient centre of Christianity, and a fascinating subject and could easily have a whole talk, or a whole conference dedicated to it alone. Alas, as you know, the true history of Glastonbury is so tangled up with legend and New Age superstitions that it would take too much time for me to try to separate any sort of truth from fiction. I will content myself from quoting from the Catholic Encyclopaedia: At Glastonbury “*a mass of tradition, legend and fiction (is) so inextricably mingled with real and important facts that no power can now sift the truth from falsehood with any certainty.*”

So much then, for Glastonbury – and yet it is worth mentioning, because it bears witness to a singular fact: namely that the history of Christianity in these islands is extremely ancient and that for many centuries Britain was considered to have been among the very first kingdoms or nations to have been evangelised.

Why was this so?

The Legend of St Peter

If you go to the chapel of the English College in Rome, upstairs in the Tribune, you will find a remarkable series of frescoes which illustrate the history of Christianity in Britain from the very earliest times, up until the martyrdom of the missionary priests in the 16th century.

In the early frescoes you will find (of course) St Augustine of Canterbury, you will find Joseph of Aramathea (!!!) – but the first fresco is perhaps the most unexpected – the first fresco depicts **St Peter**, Prince of the Apostles, visiting Britain and consecrating the first bishops for the British Church.

Now – we needn’t waste too much time, I think, on this particular legend. The fact is that in the Middle Ages, this became a popular theory (especially among supporters of the papacy) that St Peter had, personally, evangelised all the nations of Europe. This is a rather simplistic expression of what we know to be theologically true: that into the

hands of St Peter, and his successors, was placed the care of the whole Christian Church. I mention the legend here, however, because it did have one unexpected result in the more recent history of the Church....

John Henry Newman, before he converted to Catholicism edited a series of '*Lives of the English Saints*'. In one of these volumes the author (who was not Newman himself) referred to the apostolic visit of to Britain, saying that, although the story "wanted historic evidence" "yet it was received as a pious opinion by the Church at large".

That claim was one of the grounds which Charles Kingsley used to attack Newman as a man with little respect for the truth.

As we all know, this controversy with Kingsley led Newman to write his famous '*Apologia Pro Vita Sua*' – and so the legend of St Peter's visit to Britain played some small part in producing one of the great masterpieces of English Catholic literature.

The Legend of Claudia Britannica

Before we leave St Peter, I want to mention another legend also connected to him (and also with St Paul).

If you read the second letter of St Paul to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:21) you will find St Paul sends to Timothy the greetings of "*Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia and all the brethren*".

This Claudia – the only woman to be mentioned in that list – is evidently an important figure in the early Christian community. **But who was she?**

Well, one tradition states that this Claudia was the wife of Pudens (mentioned in the same letter) and that she was the mother (or perhaps the sister) of Linus (also mentioned) who was the second Bishop of Rome (St Peter's immediate successor).

Furthermore, historians have tried to find a Claudia, married to a Pudens, at the right period of Roman history: and have come up with the figure of **Claudia Rufina**, married to **Aulus Pudens** (a senator and friend of Martial, the poet). The point is that Claudia Rufina was actually British!!! (the daughter of an exiled British King, living in Rome).

And the plot thickens....

As well as being the friend of St Paul, Claudia and Pudens were also the hosts of St Peter and their house (which became the church of S. Pudentiana in Rome) was the place where St Peter celebrated Mass, and where he 'held court' over the universal church.

Now – if this story were true, we would see how Christianity, and the British race, were linked at a very early period in history.

But is it true?

The answer is: **we don't know!**

Some people have certainly taken it very seriously. **Cardinal Wiseman** took S. Pudentiana as his titular church – and if you read his novel *'Fabiola'* you will find it features there in an important role.

But too many elements of the story are lost in the mists of time for us to know if it is true or not. I would like to think it was – but wouldn't stake my life on it!

In passing it is worth noting that Claudia is also linked to the tradition that St Paul too visited England (similarly to St Peter – see above). According to this story, Claudia, having hosted St Paul in Rome, suggested that he should undertake a preaching tour of her home country too – a sort of “busman's holiday”!

I want to deal with one more influential **legend** and then, I hope, we will come on to some harder facts.

The Legend of King Lucius

In the *'Liber Pontificalis'* (the book of papal biographies dating from perhaps the first quarter of the 6th century), under the entry for Pope St Eleutherius (who died in 189) we find the following statement: that the Pope received from **Lucius**, a British king, that the king wished to become a Christian, at the Pope's behest. This story was repeated by the Venerable Bede.

Various later sources go on to develop his tradition: we are told that Eleutherius sent missionaries to Britain, helped to establish dioceses there (for example, a cathedral at St Peter's, Cornhill) and that Lucius himself not only became a convert to Christianity but even a missionary. According to one source he travelled to Gaul, where he spread the faith and finally settled at Chur, in Switzerland, where he settled down and eventually died. This legend was recently defended in a newly published book: *'King Lucius of Britain'* by David J Knight.

Now, it is true that some kings have travelled and died as missionaries. For example, my own namesake, St Richard the Pilgrim, died on this travels in around 748, and is venerated as one of the Apostles of Bavaria, where he had visited. Nevertheless, this particular legend doesn't stand up to much scrutiny. Historians have followed the lead of Carl von Harnach who debunked the legend in 1904.

Many scholars doubt the existence of Pope St Eleutherius – the *'Liber Pontificalis'* isn't always accurate for this early period. And even if there were a Pope of that name, and he did receive letters from a King Lucius – it is very unlikely that the king would have been British.

We need to remember that this period (the end of the second century) Britain was an established part of the Roman Empire – there were no native British kings worthy of the name, and such tribal chiefs as there were, were very much subservient to Rome and circumscribed in their actions.

Some people have suggested that if there were indeed a King Lucius who wrote to the Pope seeking instruction it wasn't a Briton but possibly King Lucius Aelius Abgar, King of Edessa in Syria – whom history knows to have been a Christian.

The name of the fortress in Edessa was 'Britio', and perhaps it was the king of Britio – not Brittanio – who was the correspondent of Pope Eleutherius. Or perhaps the truth is more obscure still, and is lost to us now. Either way, it doesn't seem that this legend is going to teach us very much about the origins of Christianity in Britain.

So, putting all these legends aside – what can we really say about the origins of the Faith in this country?

The Importance of Archaeology

We have to accept that we will, in fact, never know the name of the first person to bring Christianity to these islands.

For that matter, we will never know the name of the first human being to set foot on what we now call Britain, at some remote period of pre-history, when '*homo sapiens*' first began to inhabit what we now call Europe.

We do know that human beings did at some point settle in Europe, however – we are living proof of that.

And in the same way we know that Christianity did arrive in the British Isles, even before the coming of Augustine – it is a fact that we can trace and prove. What we cannot do, however, is know the names of the personalities involved (or, at least, very little about them).

What do we know and what evidence can we use? We do, of course, have the writings of Bede the Venerable, and Gildas: but as you probably know, their work is open to widely differing interpretations. Nevertheless, we can use their writings, we can use what other documentary evidence we have (very slight) and we can make use of **archaeology**, which is especially useful.

I ought to add another disclaimer! I am even less an archaeologist than I am a serious historian. I have always thought historians get the best part of historical research – we get to sit in old libraries and read books: archaeologists have to work in cold fields and dig holes – nevertheless, although I have never had the least desire to BE an archaeologist, I can accept their work as very useful: often essential.

T E Bridgett

A few moments ago I mentioned that one of the pleasures of historical research was the reading of old books. If you have had a chance to explore Canterbury much you will have discovered several very good second hand bookshops. A few years ago when I was curate at St Thomas' of Canterbury, I discovered a very interesting book in a second hand bookshop there: a book called '*The History of the Holy Eucharist in Great Britain*' by the Revd T E Bridgett, a Redemptorist priest (who wrote at the end of the 19th century).

Father Bridgett wrote his book for a **devotional** purpose and I suppose what we can call a **polemical** purpose – he wanted to prove that the faith of the earliest Christians in these islands (even before the coming of Augustine) was the same faith that he held, as a Roman Catholic priest in 1885 or thereabouts. In pursuing his case, Fr Bridgett makes use of quite a lot of archaeological evidence such as was available.

Now I read this book several years ago and found it fascinating – but it is, of course, rather out of date.

SO - I was interested, when preparing for this talk, to read a much more recent book: *'Christianity in Britain to AD 500'* by Charles Thomas (first published exactly 100 years after Bridgett's work in 1981 (revised in 1993).

The most striking thing is that Charles Thomas, writing in a different style and for a very different purpose from that of T E Bridgett, comes to much the same conclusion: that the faith of the earliest Christians in Britain, **before** the year 500, was the same faith that we as Roman Catholics celebrate today, in all essential details. (There were, of course, many **inessential** things that were different: but they needn't bother us here).

Let's look at this argument more closely.

Fr Bridgett begins this book with a couple of quotations, which are useful because they place early British Christianity firmly in the context of the Catholic Faith, as it was professed in Rome and across the Continent.

We can start with **St Jerome** (340-420 AD) who writes as follows in his Epistle 101: *"The church of the city of Rome is not different from that of the whole world. Gaul and Britain, Africa and all barbarous nations adore one Christ and follow one rule of truth."* (There was then, according to St Jerome, no difference of faith between the Church of Britain and the Church of Rome).

St John Chrysostom (347-407 AD) writes in his *'Contra Judacos'*: *"Even the British Isles (!) have felt the power of the Word, for there too churches and altars have been erected: there too, as in the extreme East,... or in the South, men may be heard discussing points of Scripture, with different voices, but not with different belief."* The same point is being made. The British Church was just one part of the universal Catholic Church dispersed throughout the world.

I might add that Bridgett – whose concern is especially for the doctrine of the **Eucharist** – brings out the point that St John Chrysostom's writings contain some very developed teachings on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and on the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass – so it is a fair assumption that these beliefs were held in Britain at this early period, as well as in the rest of the Church.

I also ought to add (in fairness) that Charles Thomas sees these passages in the Church Fathers more as "rhetorical flourishes" than statements of plain fact. He doesn't think they necessarily prove there was a developed Church flourishing in Britain at this early stage.

This comes down to the interpretation of archaeological evidence – those scholars place the origins of British Christianity earlier than Thomas is prepared to do. But whatever interpretation we put on the Fathers’ writings, I think the implication is clear: the British Church was not seen as being in any sense different from the rest of the Christian Church, as it was dispersed throughout Europe, the Near East, etc.

There was, however, one area of doctrine in which it seems the British Church was at variance with orthodox Catholic teaching: I am referring, of course, to the heresy of **Pelagianism**, generally reckoned to be the only home-grown British heresy. Pelagius was, in the words of St Jerome, a Briton: “*a most obtuse fellow, weighed down with Scottish porridge.*”

Now when it comes to Pelagianism it is interesting that Fr Bridgett and Charles Thomas again reach the same conclusion, although using very different methods. Both conclude that Pelagianism was not a major problem in the British Church, which remained basically orthodox.

Charles Thomas points out that while Pelagius was, seemingly, born in Britain, he was living in Rome at the time he developed his heresy – and the only place we have documentary evidence for Pelagianism flourishing is around the Mediterranean. None of the Fathers speak of Britain itself being much effected by Pelagius’ heresy. Indeed, Pelagianism is almost unmentioned in Britain apart from two instances: around the year 400 **Victricius**, Bishop of Rouen came to Britain to preach against the heresy, and in 429 **St Germanus of Auxerre**, accompanied by Lupus, Bishop of Troyes, came to do the same thing.

We shouldn’t imagine, however, that this means Pelagianism flourished continuously in Britain for 30 years between the visit of Victricius and the visit of St Germanus. If it had flourished for that long Britain would have been a major hot-bed of heresy, and surely we would find some reference to it among the writings of the Fathers. But we don’t.

It is much more likely that there were occasional outbursts of this heresy, and these were the occasions for the visits of Victricius and Germanus – and the outburst were quickly put down. Indeed, as Charles Thomas says, what this episode really shows is “*not only a British Church in contact with Gaul*” (itself significant, as again showing British Christianity in communion with the wider Church) “*but an orthodox one, triumphing over heresy*”.

So far, I have been following Fr Bridgett in demonstrating that the early British Church was “*Catholic in its belief*”. I now want to follow him further in showing two more things: that the British Church was “*Catholic in its discipline*”, and “*Catholic in its worship*”

Catholic in its discipline

What do we mean by a Church ‘Catholic in its discipline’? We mean a Church which has bishops, priests and deacons – in communion with the wider Church – and (**importantly**) in communion with the Pope.

Here, we are fortunate to have the records of the **Council of Arles** which took place in 314. We know that British bishops attended it – the bishops of York, London and Caerleon.

That itself is significant – it shows that the British Church had bishops, and that they were in communion with their brother bishops on the continent. But it is also interesting to see what things were decided at the Council of Arles in 314. For instance, it was decided that the Pope should, by letter, promulgate the correct date for the celebration of Easter throughout the world: it was restated that no man should marry again while his wife was still living, and it was laid down that seven bishops, or a minimum of three, should take part in the consecration of a new bishop.

We see there a sort of ‘snapshot’ of the life of the Church and the discipline of the Church, the moral life and the sacramental life.

It is important to note that the bishops at Arles recognised the place of the Pope as their leader, and were clearly in communion with him. We needn’t be anachronistic, and expect the Pope to exercise the same disciplinary powers over the Church as he does today – but clearly those bishops recognised him as the Supreme Pastor (including our three bishops).

We also see in those decrees a concern for the **sanctity of marriage** (which has always characterised the Catholic Church), and we see how seriously those bishops too the transmission of the episcopate, on which the whole sacramental life of the Church depends.

There can be no doubt then, that the 314 the discipline of the British Church was wholly Catholic.

But did things change as time went on?

Some people suggest that they did. As the **Saxon incursions** began, life in the cities collapsed – many cities were destroyed (and the cities were of course the place where the bishops had their sees). At the same time **monasticism** really took off in Britain. And it has been suggested that these two factors – the collapse of the cities and the growth of monasticism – gave the British Church a radically different character to the Church on the rest of continental Europe. It wasn’t - as it was in France, or Italy, etc - centred around the bishop in his cathedral in the City. It was much more monastic, agrarian, localised (we might almost say ‘parochial’.)

Is this an accurate picture?

Well, once again Charles Thomas is very interesting, and again he paints a picture of far greater **continuity** than we might imagine.

First of all, though, he does accept that monasticism became extremely important in the later British Church. Indeed, he sees the introduction of monasticism as really the one big **innovation** in the first 300 years or so of British Christianity (even then, he points out this monasticism wasn't a home-grown invention but reached Britain from the Near East and Africa – showing again the links between Britain and the wider Church). But monasticism did develop in particular forms in Britain and it became enormously influential.

Does this mean that the episcopal character of the Church – the Catholic discipline of the Church – was lost? Not at all. The destruction of the cities made life more difficult for bishops – but they continued to exist. Dioceses were not as clearly defined, geographical areas as on the continent – they were vaguely co-terminus with the local kingdom or principality – but the life of the Church went on. We have evidence of bishops travelling with portable altars – even portable fonts for baptism – to more remote parts of their dioceses. Nor did the rise of monasticism mean the episcopal system was eclipsed: it was simply adapted. We do have evidence of bishops being subordinate to abbots – a situation St Bede was aware of, and refers to as '*ordine inusitato*' ('contrary to the normal order of things'). But nevertheless the bishops continued to exist and carried out their important functions.

Charles Thomas even suggests that the Metropolitan system – common across the rest of Europe – may have continued to exist in Britain until a comparatively late date. He suggests that York may have exercised a Metropolitan function even as late as 471, and even proposed a place where Metropolitan synods could have been held – the large '*principia*' building in York, which archaeology tells us was still covered and in use as late as the early 6th century.

But this takes us into the realms of speculation. Our point is simply to show that the British Church was indeed 'Catholic' in its discipline, and remained so through the course of its existence.

Catholic in its worship

Finally, I want to show that the British Church was Catholic in its worship, as well as in its belief and discipline.

Here we are talking primarily about the Mass. There has been some excellent work on early liturgies of this date – for example by Hugh Williams and David McRoberts – and Charles Thomas has some fascinating information about baptism and burial rites. However, the Mass is the most important act of Catholic worship, and that's the one that concerns us here.

Fr Bridgett, writing at the end of the 19th century, is mostly concerned to show that the British Church accepted the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and consequently the sacrificial nature of the Mass.

Here the language used is often illuminating. Bridgett cites a penitential canon referring to the Eucharistic species which begins '*If anyone by negligence let fall and lose a sacrifice*' – the word 'sacrifice' is used here in the way we use the word 'host', from '*hostia*', to refer to our communion in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. Again, Charles

Thomas suggests that in everyday speech the early Britons referred to the Mass as '*offerenda*' and (as a Cornishman himself!) he notes that this entered the Cornish language as '*oferen*'. Obviously the word '*offerenda*' (literally 'things which must be offered') is also laden with sacrificial overtones.

In writing his book, Fr Bridgett also made use of such archaeological evidence as was available to him. In particular, he notes the evidence for the use of **stone altars** among the early Britons – these were quite small, as they also were on the continent at a similar date, simply a stone **mensa** mounted on one or two pillars. Gildas refers to the altar as '*sacrosancta altare*' – which means '*most holy altar*'. We have already noted that portable altars were also in use, where they were necessary. Charles Thomas, who is able to use archaeology to a much greater extent than Bridgett, comments on the various early Christian inscriptions that have been found in Britain, some of which are relevant here. I would like to mention especially the use of the image of the **chalice**, out of which grow vines or perhaps the tree of life. This has been found in various mosaics in Britain, among them the mosaics at Littlecote Park and Fifehead Neville.

I feel sure that Fr Bridgett would have loved to comment on that, as that symbol is a rich image of our incorporation, through the Eucharist, in the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church.

Much more could be said – but perhaps those few examples are enough to indicate that the early British Church did indeed have a developed understanding of the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist and of the Real Presence of Christ. Nor should that surprise us, since the writings of the Fathers of the Church are often so explicit on this subject and (as we have many times attempted to show) the British Church was in now way separate from the rest of Catholic Christianity, but rather a living part of it.

As I draw to a close I would like to say a few words about the proto-martyr of Britain, **St Alban**, and in particular about this shrine in the town which now bears his name. I am sure you are all familiar with the story of St Alban who gave his life to save a Christian priest, converted and himself died a Christian and a martyr.

There is some debate as to the period at which St Alban's martyrdom ought to be placed. Gildas seems to place it in the reign of Diocletian – about 300 – although Gildas himself admits he is uncertain about this.

For myself, I am quite persuaded by the theory of **John Morris**, who prepared to place the martyrdom of Alban as early as 209 AD, during the period which Emperor Septimus Severus was visiting Britain. If this is the case, it means the Church in Britain was indeed flourishing at a very early date, and the statements of Jerome, Chrysostom and others, referring to the Church in Britain, can be taken at their face value, and not simply as rhetorical flourishes as Charles Thomas suggested.

However, what I am interested in here is not so much the date of Alban's martyrdom as the importance of his cult, not only to the British but in the wider Church as well.

We know that devotion to him spread, not only in Britain but across Europe. The poet Fortunatus, Bishop of Poitiers, praised him in a poem written around 600. But what is

even more remarkable is that even the Saxons seem to have developed a devotion to this famous **British** martyr. We know there were very few of the British cities that remained inhabited in Saxon times. York was one – London – Canterbury – and **Saint Alban's** was another.

W H C Frend, writing back in 1970 suggested that there was some evidence of continuity between the British Church and the Anglo-Saxon Church that succeeded it. Not only that, but the Saxons even took their devotion to St Alban abroad, judging by the numerous '*Albanskirche*' – churches dedicated to St Alban - in the post-Roman cities of Germany. According to one tradition the relics of St Alban are now in Cologne cathedral.

How very appropriate it seems, that the Proto-martyr St Alban should have provided a very rare instance of continuity, and even co-operation, between the British Church, planted in the days of the Roman Empire, and the Anglo-Saxon Church that eventually succeeded it.

CONCLUSION

It is time to conclude. As I said right at the beginning, in talking about the Church in Britain before Augustine, we don't have a lot of evidence to work with, and what evidence we do have is often open to widely differing interpretations.

At the same time, I have tried to draw out certain characteristics of this ancient, British Church, and show that those characteristics place it in **continuity**, continuity with the rest of the Christian Church in Europe at that time and, indeed, in continuity with the Catholic faith which we all share today.

That word **continuity** is one I would like to stress.

The Christian faith arrived in these islands during the time when Britain was still part of the Roman Empire. When exactly we don't know – possibly as early as 200 AD – I would like to think so anyway. From the start, therefore, British Christianity was not an insular, isolated phenomenon – it was part of something much larger. The British Church was, in the **essential** characteristics **indistinguishable** from the universal Catholic Church which existed on the continent, in the Middle East and elsewhere. It was, as I tried to show, Catholic in its faith, its discipline and structure, and in its forms of worship. British bishops appealed to Gaulish bishops for help in defending the one true faith they shared against the innovations of Pelagius. British bishops sat in council with other bishops, and in communion with Rome, at the Council of Arles in 314 (and at the Councils of Nice (325), Sardica (347) and Rimini (359) to mention only those we know about). British Christians offered the same sacrifice, administered the same sacraments and observed the same great feast-days as their brethren elsewhere.

As time went on, British Christianity did indeed develop characteristics which distinguished it from the Church in Gaul, Italy and elsewhere – notably the dominance of monasticism. But these differences were differences of style, and not of substance.

As we all know, Saxon Christians and British Christians often found themselves at variance – but again, these were differences of style, and not of doctrine. The differences were, objectively speaking, quite minor, and I think the antagonism that developed between British and Saxon Christians must be put down largely to reasons of nationalism, and not religious doctrine. The British never forgave the Saxons for their violence, and the harm they had done to *‘Brittania’*. The Saxons, for their part (and we can see this in St Bede) never forgave the British for their failure to hold out the light of the Gospel to the new inhabitants of their island. But it is important to realise that what we are talking about here are two different viewpoints of two different nations having a shared history – we are not talking about two different Churches.

Finally, as I mentioned, there is now some archaeological evidence starting to emerge – albeit patchy and again open to different interpretations – of a measure of continuity between British Christianity and the Anglo-Saxon Church that succeeded it – St Alban’s being a case in point. As I said, how appropriate, if the site of the British Proto-martyr should have been a place where British and Saxon Christians first started to live and work together.

I would like to end with a quote from Charles Thomas, which sums up what I have been trying to say. He cites Jocelyn Toynbee’s 1953 work *‘Christianity in Roman Britain’* and says the following: *“In 1953, many people regarded Jocelyn Toynbee as over-bold when she stated that ‘the so-called Celtic Church, surviving continuously in the North & West, was thoroughly Roman in creed and origin: Roman, too, initially, in its organisation and practice.’ Today, three decades later, this is no more than the conclusion to which the balance of probabilities leads us.”*