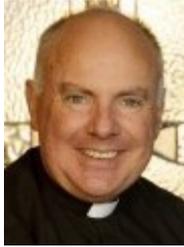


## EARLY ANGLICANISM - WHAT DO WE KNOW?

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It is possible that Christianity came to Britain as early as the year 44 AD. It could have come with the Roman conquest since some soldiers and other Romans were Christians.

It is almost impossible to know this with any certainty. We do know however that the early historian of the Church in Britain, Bede, speaks of Alban, a Roman soldier who became the first known British martyr, having been beheaded while protecting a priest perhaps as early as 209 AD.

We also know that three British bishops, a priest and a deacon attended the Council of Arles in 314 suggesting that by this early date there was an ecclesiastical administration present in Britain.

The Council of Arles took place in Gaul, modern day France, and was called by the Roman Emperor Constantine I to deal with the Donatist schism. The Donatists were a schismatic group in the African Church who refused to accept their bishop, Caecilian, on the grounds that he had been consecrated by Felix of Aptunga, a traitor during the Diocletian persecution. Nothing new in the church it seems!

We also know that British clergy attended the Council of Nicea in 325, again summoned by Emperor Constantine to deal the Arian controversy surrounding the divinity and humanity of Christ.

There seems to be ample evidence to show that the British or Celtic form of Christianity developed separately from European Christianity and although it appeared to be doctrinally orthodox it differed markedly in its organisation and emphasis.

The Celtic Church placed emphasis on the wholeness of life, embracing a deep awareness of creation and God's action in the world. It inspired awe and wonder and spoke of the presence of the supernatural, the communion of saints, angels and evil to be conquered in the name of Christ.

The cross was at the centre of Celtic spirituality and many of these ancient stone crosses are still found throughout Britain. The Celtic Church also had its own church calendar which included a different date for Easter and had quite different practices to the mainland.

The fate of this Celtic Church was bound up with the economic decline in Britain in the post-Roman period where the mechanisms of trade and a money economy disappeared along with the decline in towns and the rise of paganism and attacks on the church which pushed it away to the west of Britain.

Despite all these problems the great saints and heroes of the Celtic Church emerged in the years that followed – people like Patrick, Columba, Ninian, David and many others – and the Celtic Church expanded into areas where the Romans had never been.

Many artefacts of this ancient Celtic Church have been discovered in recent years – chalices, baptismal fonts and spoons and works of art which show that the members of this church devoted time, skill and resources to the beautification of worship and that they had confidence in salvation and belief in hope, joy, perseverance and holiness.

The Celtic Church seemed to have been well established in Britain in the first five centuries, organised with its own bishops and clergy and possessing an independent spiritual tradition. It undertook extensive missionary work and established monastic communities where academic pursuits were in place. It seems to have taken a place in the wider councils of the Church but it remained isolated and distinct from the Church on the European mainland.

The Celtic Church placed emphasis on its monastic communities which were overseen by an abbot, not a bishop, and it was from these communities that people went out to evangelise. The bishops were present and had particular roles, like ordaining, but it was the abbot who wielded the power in the Celtic Church. The Celtic Church existed very much as spheres of influence and not in the territorial diocesan model as it was on the European mainland.

When Augustine of Canterbury arrived in Britain in 597, sent by Pope Gregory I to bring the Christian faith to Britain, he was surprised to find the church already in existence and active and that it had been present for some six hundred years! In fact he found that Queen Bertha, the wife of the pagan King Ethelbert, was a Christian and had her own bishop and clergy with her and that the church was alive and well in Britain.

Anglicanism owes much to its early development in Celtic Britain. It has always had an independent and particular heritage as part of the wider church. The story continues ....

By Archdeacon **Brian Douglas**