



## A Brief History of Celtic Christianity from 373-651 A.D. Centering on the Life of St. Aidan

It seems fitting on St. Aidan's 80th Anniversary to consider the Anglican roots of our faith and to learn what a truly Christian saint St. Aidan was. The material for this paper is largely drawn from Flame in My Heart, St. Aidan for Today by David Adam and John Marsden's book The Illustrated Bede, an Ecclesiastical Chronicle of the English People of Northumbria.

In researching this paper I found it essential in knowing the life of St. Aidan to understand the bedrock of his faith. In 596 A.D., The Bishop of Rome, Gregory the Great, having observed the blond-haired, blue eyed young male slaves brought to Rome, wanted someone to go back to the British Isles to evangelize "the barbarians." He sent St. Augustine to Kent to establish his church. But when Augustine arrived there, to his surprise, he found the Christian faith had already been established. This is how it happened. In 373 A.D. St. Patrick was born along the River Clyde in Scotland in what was then Roman Britain. As they conquered, the Roman soldiers brought a semblance of Christianity into the British Isles. Patrick's parents were themselves Christians, but as the Romans were driven back to Rome by the Picts and Jutes and Angles, the faith suffered and paganism again flourished. Patrick himself rebelled against the faith of his parents. While he and his friends were loitering along the River Clyde one day watching the ships come in, he was lured onto one of boats and captured by pirates. They spirited him away and sold him as a slave to Ireland. There, living in abject poverty and suffering from hunger and cold, like the Prodigal Son, Patrick returned to his Christian roots and committed himself to Christ. Years later he escaped and returned to Scotland but while there was haunted by dreams of Ireland.

At the age of 30, he returned to Ireland and went right back to his former slave owner and master who gave him permission to preach the Gospel in his barn. The hearts of the Irish were open and receptive to his message. Gaining courage, he lit a bonfire on the night of a pagan festival to proclaim the light of Christ when the only bonfires allowed were to pagan deities. Because such an offence was punishable by death, he was arrested and brought before the King, who on hearing Patrick give the Gospel message, was converted.

Thus in 432 began the great ministry of St. Patrick to Ireland. His ministry covered 60 years. During that time he founded 365 churches, and by each church was erected a monastery, a school of learning for the young.<sup>1</sup> Patrick's converts rejected the faith of Palladin who wanted the young Christians to accept him as their Roman bishop. St. Augustine discovered very few wanted to turn to Rome; their roots were in their own Celtic form of Christianity started by St. Patrick. St. Columba, St. Patrick's successor, arrived from Ireland in 565 to found a monastery off the coast of Scotland on the island of Iona. So fine a Christian was he, that Aidan, his successor, often quoted him and incorporated Columba's sayings into his rule of life.

At King Oswald's request, Cormac from Iona was appointed first missionary bishop to Northumbria (a region spanning what is now Northern England and Southern Scotland). Oswald, a Christian king, returning from exile on the island of Iona to rule the northern kingdom, wanted someone to Christianize the pagan people he had come to rule. Cormac, however, found the fierce Picts impossible to evangelize. Thousands had been slaughtered by the retreating Romans and weren't about to turn to the Christian god. Aidan, a priest of Iona, having heard how harshly Cormac dealt with the people of Northumbria in trying to bring them under control, spoke out and asked Cormac directly if a gentler approach might not have been better to serve the spread of the Gospel to those foreign people. On hearing Aidan speak, the priests of Iona quickly ordained him bishop and asked him to go to Northumbria to replace Cormac.

Thus began the great ministry of St. Aidan. Preparations had to be made for the long journey into Northumbria. First, St. Aidan prayed for guidance to select just the right team of men to accompany him. Rather than pick older, experienced monks, he preferred to choose strong young men whom he could mold into the men of God to do the job. He insisted his men travel lightly, a precept he would hold all his life. They also must be gifted men with practical skills. Some would be craftsmen, others builders, some cooks, farmers or hunters in order to establish his new religious community among the Angles. His aim was to be completely self-sufficient, so his men had to be ready to work to that end.

Next, they had to choose the right overland route to get them across northern Anglia to Bamburgh on the east coast of the British Isles where King Oswald resided. It would take weeks of travel first by boat and then overland where they would be in danger of attack from alien peoples or wild animals. They prayed each day for protection. Aidan required that all his men know the Psalms by heart which they recited by rotation as they traveled. In the morning and evening they spent time with the Gospels which they also learned by heart in order to share with any stranger they might meet along the way. Their conversation was often reciting Scripture together, answering one another through verses they had memorized. As they left their boats and started overland they would encounter people of the hill country who might ambush them as they traveled.

But Aidan recognized that the real enemy was the resentment and animosity these people felt after being conquered by King Oswald. Unlike Cormac, he empathized with them in their oppression. He wanted to bring reconciliation through preaching the Gospel of love to these people of similar Celtic roots to his own. But his mission was to press on to Bamburgh, the home of the King on the east coast. Coming from Iona, he and his group were happy that they would soon be near the sea again. They pressed through warrior tribes now settled in farmsteads whose language they did not know. How surprised they were when they at last came to Bamburgh to be met at the gate by King Oswald himself. The King greeted them warmly and promised to give St. Aidan anything at all to help him establish his mission. While there, Aidan's men noticed that the king was indeed a deeply committed Christian himself. Often he would be found in the little sanctuary he had built, seated, hands open on his knees, praying— sometimes for hours. Although King Oswald generously offered to help Aidan out in anyway he could, Aidan felt some royal pressure to establish their community close to the palace. But Bishop Aidan wished to establish his mission independent of the king. They were to trust in their Lord for direction and guidance, unhindered by the king's wishes.

Aidan who loved his native Iona felt the pull of the sea again. He looked out over the horizon and saw a tidal island he wished to investigate. As he and his men traversed this little island, really an isthmus at low tide, he found it to be just the place. There were fresh water wells and hazelwood forests ideal for building. The land was arable. They could grow grain and sustain cattle on it for milk, meat and the dried skin parchments they would need to make books. The abundance of island birds told them that there were fish in the sea. This island called Lindisfarne would be just the right distance from the King. They would be able to see Bamburgh but be removed from it. When they asked the King's permission to leave and live on Lindisfarne, the King reluctantly agreed. Bishop Aidan felt that God had led them to the perfect island to begin their community life.

"Here would be a place of solitude, stillness, and sanctity."<sup>2</sup> Much needed to be done. Land needed to be cleared and buildings erected, especially the school where they would start to teach the youth. The King was amazed to hear that before they were to begin any building, St. Aidan and his brothers would spend 40 days in prayer and fasting to rid the land of evil spirits. Forty days they rested, fasted, and prayed, setting their priorities for the days to come. All hostile elements had to be banished; this had to be a place to reveal the presence, the power, the peace of God.<sup>3</sup>

All day until evening they fasted and then ate only a bit of bread with watered down milk and an egg. Sundays were feast days. When the 40 day fast was over, they set to work. Each day they worked constructing their monastery until weariness or darkness stopped them. After that, they went to learning, reading, and prayers. "Aidan was forever reminding [his men] that they could not talk about God if they did not talk *to* Him."<sup>4</sup> Prayer was an integral part of their life there. Meditation was balanced with activity, the practical with the devotional so that their lives exhibited evenness, an ebb and flow like the tides. Each brother took on a cell mate called an "anamchara"— a young man who would learn from his elder the spiritual life including the recitation of all 150 Psalms and a Gospel. They went on missions together throughout the surrounding countryside until gradually the student became the teacher. This was a slow process that took years. Monks were brought in from Iona and Ireland to accelerate the process of training young men to become monks or priests. The students learned to write on tablets of wax which were reviewed and corrected by their elders and then rubbed out. When their work reached a certain level they were allowed to write on parchment.

As St Aidan's Community's reputation grew, the island became overrun with visitors. As welcome as these visitors were, it became almost impossible to find solitude and silence the brothers needed to carry on their ministry effectively. St. Aidan himself was so sought out that he needed an escape where he could be quiet and alone. He found this solitude on Hothrush Island, another tidal island nearby where he could build a beehive cell and be alone to pray. It was common at that time to believe that demons could bring ships to grief and cause other destructive events. Aidan used his time on Hothrush Island to wrestle and pray to ward off these demons. Once from a distance, when Aidan saw smoke pouring up around Bamburgh, he realized that Oswald was being attacked by his chief enemy: Penda. The only prayer of St. Aidan to come down to us was said at this time, "Lord, see what evil Penda does."<sup>5</sup> As he prayed that prayer, the smoke changed direction sending Penda and his men fleeing. For a time, Penda was defeated and he was banished from Northumbria.

But another battle with Penda would slay the great King Oswald in 642 at the age of 38 years.

St. Aidan believed that repetition trains and strengthens the mind to become a bulwark against doubt and compromise with sin. This discipline of mind and spirit in learning the Psalms and other Scriptures brought blessing to Lindisfarne and to the neighboring hamlets. People flocked to St. Aidan for spiritual strength and healing. Aidan and his community would try to meet the physical needs of the people by giving away any extra possessions they might have. One was not to be ruled or encumbered by possessions. It was from Columba that St. Aidan learned early on to make this discipline a top priority. He treated all men from royalty down to slaves alike and trained his men to do the same.

One Easter Day when King Oswald and St. Aidan were dining together, a crowd of poor people gathered outside the palace gates asking for alms. On hearing this, Oswald sent their meal out to them on silver dishes, commanding that not only was all the food to be given to them but the silver was to be divided among them as well. Aidan praised the King for his generosity and taking his right hand, blessed him, asking God that the royal hand even in death never wither. A few years later, when Oswald was slain at the Battle of Heavenfield, his arms and head were severed from his body and his right hand preserved in a silver casket. It was said that, true to St. Aidan's prophecy, the King's hand never withered and was a source of healing and blessing to all who came near. Even the ground where Oswald was killed became hallowed and many miracles supposedly occurred there.

"If you are to meet people you need to have your feet on the ground"<sup>6</sup> was a precept Aidan instilled in his students. He meant it quite literally. He preferred walking around his parish to riding and encouraged his students to do the same. It was better to walk because it slowed one's pace and was easier for the unhurried recitation of the Psalms. Moreover, it put you on the same level as the common man. The brothers were encouraged to pray continually whether at work or rest. Short Prayers were better because they could be learned and repeated. e.g., "Maranatha" or "Come, Lord Jesus."

After Oswald's death, Oswin became King of Deira, the southern half of Northumbria. Oswald's brother, Oswy, was the natural heir to the throne of Bernicia, the northern half. Not only was Oswin fair in appearance, he was a noble king, very generous to all and noted for his humility. He and St. Aidan became close friends. One day while the bishop was dining at the royal palace, Oswin offered him one of the finest horses from the royal stable. He reasoned that Aidan, who preferred walking about the country, would get along better and faster with a horse. Aidan's men agreed and urged him to accept the King's gift.

Momentarily flattered and over-awed by such a gift, St. Aidan reluctantly accepted the horse along with an excellent bridle and saddle studded with silver and precious stones. No sooner did he set out from the palace on his horse, than he felt uncomfortable. The people at the palace gate bowed in to him. He was accustomed to stopping along the way and ministering to the people, not riding above them as he did on this royal horse with all its trappings. A new worry crept into his mind. How was he to protect himself and the horse from thieves, to say nothing of the bejeweled saddle and bridle.

When a beggar crossed his path asking for alms, suddenly Aidan knew what he must do. He dismounted and gave the man his horse with all its trappings. The beggar stared at Aidan in disbelief. Was this a trick? But no, Aidan told the man where he might go to sell the horse and get good money for it along with its trappings. The beggar went galloping down the path a new

man, and Aidan felt such a lightness of spirit he had not experienced for a long time.

One day Aidan had to return to Oswin's court. He could see from the King's face that he not only knew about the horse but was perplexed and disappointed that Aidan had spurned his gift. When the King confronted Aidan, the bishop's reply was quick. "What do you think, O King? Is the son of a mare worth more in your eyes than that son of God?"<sup>7</sup> The whole court was stunned into silence. Everyone wondered what the King would do next. After a moment, the King removed his belt and gave it to a nearby thane. He then proceeded to kneel at Aidan's feet and said, "Never again will I mention this, or pass judgment on how much of your money you are giving to 'the sons of God.'" Aidan was pleased with his reply but felt a sudden chill pass over him. When a fellow priest asked him what was the matter, the bishop turned to the priest and said privately that while he had never met "such a humble king" he felt that Oswin had not long to live.

At such a premonition, Aidan broke down and wept. His prophecy was not long in coming to pass. Shortly after, Oswin's kingdom came under attack by Oswald's brother, Oswy, King of Bernicia, in the north. The irony was that Oswy was also a Christian who as a boy had been trained at Iona along with his brother, Oswald. He was also sympathetic to the monks at Lindisfarne. But he was young and overly ambitious and wanted to unite the two kingdoms of Northumbria which included his own and Deira, where Oswin ruled. By nature not warlike, Oswin, when he realized that he was outflanked, dispersed his men and tried to escape with his life but was betrayed and killed by one of his own thanes on August 20th, 651. The people of both kingdoms were outraged that a fellow Christian king would do such a thing.

Brokenhearted and broken in health, Aidan went to St. Peter's, Bamburgh, in order to give thanks for the lives of Oswald and Oswin and to pray for the soul of Oswy. He wanted to pray at the shrine of his dear friend, Oswald, where his hand lay in the silver casket, but while approaching the church, the darkness closed around him. He never made it inside, but lay outside mortally ill in a shelter erected for him. Eleven days after Oswin's death, St. Aidan also died. He wanted to go on one more mission, and was told that help was on the way; but it came too late, and he died in the arms of a young monk outside the church. Perhaps on his lips was this prayer of his mentor, Columba:

"My dearest Lord  
You are a bright flame before me  
A guiding star above me,  
A kindly shepherd behind me,  
today and evermore."<sup>9</sup>

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Internet: [www.saintpatrick.org/ss/o317patr.htm](http://www.saintpatrick.org/ss/o317patr.htm)

<sup>2</sup>David Adam. *Flame in My Heart, St. Aidan Today*. (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1998), p.51.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.*, p.52.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.*, p.80.

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.*, p.89.

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.*, p.106.

<sup>7</sup>*ibid.*, p.114.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.*, p.115.

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.*, p.144.