

CHAPTER 1

THE COMING OF THE CROSS

Edinburgh Festival chaos was upon us again. Over a million visitors were pouring into Scotland's capital city in August, with thousands of performers seeking to draw in their audiences to experience music, theatre, dance, poetry and comedy. Dressed as a monk in a brown cassock, I led a tour group through the masses of humanity, staff in hand, face resolute and steadfast. My destiny was the National Museum of Scotland on Chambers Street. Descending into the quiet basement, we left behind a world of commotion and bustle and entered the world of the early church in Scotland.

There before us stood Celtic crosses, with their intricate weaving and unique symbolism, beckoning to us to unravel their mystical meanings. 'The earliest Celtic crosses that have been discovered in our nation date back to about A.D. 450 and were found in the southern part of Scotland among the Britons,' I told the group. 'Look at the beautiful artistry of these Celtic knots. This symbol was here long before Christianity, but it has a universal meaning of eternity, adopted by Christians. If you start at any point, you always end up where you started – like a circle. See the base of this cross: sometimes these standing crosses were ten or twelve feet tall. The long base represented the tree of life and the *axis mundi*, for Christ, who is God and man, created the world, and broke the curse of sin and death through the cross, bringing forgiveness and eternal life to those who receive Him. Originally the missionary monks would call people to worship with a hand

bell, and they would meet under a cross like this one, to have an open-air service.'

'Why is there a circle on the top part of the cross?' asked an inquisitive and sprightly elderly lady. 'Is it true that the Celtic cross is a fusion of Christianity with Paganism? I've heard that the circle represents either the moon or sun god.'

For the next fifteen minutes we explored the mystery of the Celtic cross. We had to go back in time to Emperor Constantine who claimed to have had a vision of a cross and heard the words from heaven: 'In this sign conquer!' Before the Battle of Milvian Bridge in the year 312 he had told his soldiers to paint the Greek abbreviation of Christ, the *chi-rho*, on their shields. He defeated his rival, Maxentius, and then was plunged into war again with Licinius. For many who watched this next battle it was a struggle between Christianity and Paganism. Again, Constantine was victorious, and he became the sole Emperor of the Roman Empire. From the year 327 coins were struck with the *chi-rho* on top of the military *labarum*, with the serpent of Paganism crushed underneath. This celebration was encircled by a victory wreath. On the other side of the coin was the head of Emperor Constantine. By 337 the *chi-rho* with the letters Alpha and Omega appeared on his coins, depicting Christ as God.

If you had been a Briton, Pict or Scot living in Edinburgh, or along the Antonine Wall stretching just west of the city to Dumbarton, you would constantly have seen the symbol of Christ, either on the shields of soldiers, or on the official Roman coins. The wealthy even began inscribing the *chi-rho* on their silverware. The oldest Christian artefacts in Scotland were unearthed from Traprain Law near Haddington in a large stash of silverware, dated to the year 410. Among the silverware were ladles with the *chi-rho* and jugs with scenes from the Bible. It was the cross that began to appear as a victory symbol, originally inside a circular wreath, which eventually became a circle, ring – or nimbus – nothing to do with the sun or moon god at all.

'But when did the Christians first come to Scotland?' asked a burly American guest.

‘It was firstly among the Britons,’ I answered. ‘At the time of Christ, the Welsh-speaking Britons were widespread in tribal groups, from Cornwall and Devon in the south, to Wales, and then north in Scotland – even as far as Aberdeenshire. According to Tertullian, who wrote in about A.D. 200, there were ‘haunts of the Britons – inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ.’¹ It is likely that the ‘haunts of the Britons’ meant areas north of the Antonine Wall, which were at the fringes of the Roman Empire. Another Church Father called Origen also had similar information about the Britons, and asked, ‘For when, before the arrival of Christ did the land of Britain agree together in the worship of the one God?’² Medieval Scottish historians state from earlier records, now lost, that King Donald and his courtiers received Christ in 203.³ Another ancient tradition says that King Lucius of the Britons was converted to Christ in 179, and he sent bishops to all of the twenty-eight chief cities of the Britons, with Caer-Brython, or today’s Dumbarton, being the stronghold in Scotland. So again, we see the Christian faith was anchored in Scotland by the year 200.⁴

1. Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, editors Roberts A., and Donaldson J., Vol III (Edinburgh: T&T Clark); (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), Vol. 7, p. 158.

2. Origen (c. A.D. 240), Commentary on Ezekiel 4:6, *From Origen of Alexandria: Exegetical Works on Ezekiel*, edited by Roger Pearse, trans. Mischa Hooker (Ipswich: Chieftain Publishing, 2014), p.131. Some scholars have suggested that Britain here means Brittany in France, but the Romans always called Brittany ‘Armorica’.

3. John Spottiswoode, *The History of the Church of Scotland: Beginning the year of our Lord 203, and continued to the end of the Reign of King James the VI of Ever Blessed Memory*, third edition, London (original edition, 1639), Book 1, p. 4.

4. The earliest record of King Lucius of the Britons receiving the Christian faith is in the *Liber Pontificalis* (A.D. 530). The entry says: ‘He [Eleutherius, bishop of Rome] received a letter from Lucius, King of Britain, asking him to appoint a way by which Lucius might become a Christian.’ Bede had access to this information and also recorded the event: Bede (A.D. 725), *Chronica maiora*, 4131, and in his *A History of the English Church and People*, written in 731, Book 1:4 and Book 5:24, p. 42 and p. 332 (Penguin Classics, 1955, 1968). The date given by Bede of A.D. 156 is wrong, because Eleutherius was Bishop of Rome between

As we wandered through the museum basement, I pointed out crosses depicting the symbols of Paganism being driven out by the preaching of the gospel. We encountered Egyptian-style crosses in the circles, showing the influence of the Egyptian desert fathers like Anthony on Scotland's early church; after the Britons, later crosses celebrated the message of Jesus among the Picts, then the Scots, then the Anglo-Saxons, and finally amongst the Vikings.

The cost of the Christian faith to become deeply rooted in Scotland was extremely high. During the severe persecution of Emperor Diocletian (303–313), thousands of Christians were slaughtered all over the Roman Empire, which also stretched to Britain. Eusebius, an eyewitness in Rome, described such a horrendous period, in *The History of the Church*:

I saw with my own eyes, the places of worship thrown down from top to bottom, to the very foundations, the inspired holy Scriptures committed to the flames in the middle of the public squares So many were killed on a single day that the axe, blunted and worn out by the slaughter, was broken in pieces, while the exhausted executioners had to be periodically relieved.⁵

Bede tells us that 'many others of both sexes throughout the land' of Britain were martyred for their faith during this Pagan onslaught.⁶ An Irish scribal entry in an A.D. 770 copy of Jerome's *Martyrology* states that 'In Britain was Albinus [Alban] martyr,

174 and 189. The traditional date of King Lucius' conversion is 179. Gildas, in the 540s, records the twenty-eight cities of the Britons in his *Ruin of Britain*, but it is Nennius in c.800 who lists them, with Caer Brithon, or Dumbarton, as the most northerly city. *History of the Britons (Historia Brittonum)*, translation by J. A. Giles, in Parentheses Publications (Medieval Latin Series: Cambridge, Ontario, 2000), Vol. 7, p. 5. It is Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1136) who refers to the twenty-eight bishops sent by King Lucius to the twenty-eight cities of the Britons (*The History of the Kings of Britain*, Book 4:19 and 20). He seems to get this information from a now-lost book of Gildas, who must have had access in his time to early church records.

5. Eusebius, *The History of the Church* (Penguin Classics, 1989), Book 8:2-9, pp. 258-65.

6. Bede, *A History of the English Church and People* (Penguin Classics, 1983), chapter 7, p. 47.

along with others, 889 in number, placed in the list of those whose names are written in the book of life.⁷ Furthermore, Archbishop Spottiswoode, having access to early, now lost, church records, wrote:

But that which furthered not a little the propagation of the Gospel in those parts was the persecution raised by Diocletian, which at that time was hot in the South parts of Britain. This brought many Christians, both Preachers and Professors, into this Kingdom, who were all kindly received by Cratilinth, and had the Isle of Man given them ... for their maintenance In this Isle King Cratilinth erected a stately Church to the honour of the Saviour During his Reign Christian religion did prosper exceedingly.⁸

Later that century, and into the next, the Pagan Picts from north of the Forth Estuary and the Scots from Ireland massacred the Britons. When Rome was sacked by the Germanic tribes in 410, the Roman legions departed for Italy, leaving a vulnerable British border. Gildas, writing in the 540s, expressed the despair of the Britons who sent a begging letter to the Roman governor Aetius to help them, with the words: ‘The barbarians drive us to the sea; the sea throws us back on the barbarians: thus two modes of death await us, we are either slain or drowned.’⁹

When Rome was finally totally ruined by the Visigoths in 476, the Roman Empire in the West collapsed. By the seventh century the Britons in Scotland had either been killed, driven out as refugees to Brittany in France, Wales, or Cornwall, or had assimilated with the Picts and Scots. However, two courageous

7. Hugh Williams points out that in the edition of Jerome’s *Martyrology* there is one codex (*Codex Bern.*) dated at about 770, which states this number of martyrs. This codex had been in the possession of someone connected with Ireland (see *Gildas: De Excidio Britanniae, or the Ruin of Britain*, edited by Hugh Williams, 1901, facsimile reprint by Llanerch Press, 2006), footnote, pp. 25-27.

8. Spottiswoode, Book 1, p. 4.

9. Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, Part 1:20, p. 47, edited by Hugh Williams, first published in 1901 for the Hon. Society of Cymmrodorion by David Nutt (Facsimile reprint by Llanerch Press), 2006.

British Christians, Ninian of Whithorn and Patrick of Ystrad Clud (Strathclyde), had a significant impact on the Southern Picts and the Scots in Ireland, in particular. Scottish missionaries from Ireland poured into this nation, as the fruit of Patrick's ministry, and were led by such luminaries as Columba, who established his mission base on Iona, near Mull, in 563. From there, the northern Picts were Christianised.

In turn Aidan was sent from the community at Iona in 635 to pioneer a work at Lindisfarne to reach the Pagan Northumbrians. It would be on Lindisfarne that the beautiful artistic work of the Lindisfarne Gospels would be produced in about the year 700. Lindisfarne would be the inspiration for other monks who would set up education centres in Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, where Bede would become known as the Father of English History, and in York, from where Alcuin would travel to establish a base of higher education under Charlemagne in France.

The later Celtic crosses show the extraordinary Christian story in Scotland, for woven into the artistry are the cultures of the Romans, Britons, Picts, Scots, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings. Every time the church was established in one culture, another culture would seek to destroy the church; this would be followed by the persecuting culture in turn being converted to Christ, only to be persecuted by the next wave, until finally even the rapacious Vikings were tamed by the cross of Jesus.

The church throughout the first nine centuries went through phases of flourishing, persecution, and falling into compromise and worldliness, and yet the foundation for so much of what we came to treasure in Scotland came out of these movements. In the stump of early Christian practice would be the seeds of our law, education, democracy, human rights, social reforms, healthcare, science and Christian values, which would much later become a tree bearing good fruit. In the centuries to come, Scotland would rise up and be transformed, becoming a light to the nations. Now that we have briefly sketched how Christianity became established in this country, we can progress to seeking an answer to the question of this book: *What has Christianity ever done for Scotland?*