

The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

Land Of Saints And Scholars

He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;
The Lord shall hold them in derision.

Psalm 2:4

From the time of Christ, when its territories reached their greatest extent, the Emperors of Rome had ruled from Britain in the East to Arabia in the West and from the Rhine and Danube in the North to the Sahara desert in the South. In the 5th Century all that changed.

The Fall Of Rome

The mighty Roman Empire, which had ruled its lands by brute force for more than a thousand years, grew weak and vulnerable. For 400 years there had been an ongoing love-hate relationship with the tribes along the northern border. Goths, Vandals, Franks, Lombards, Burgundians, Angles, Saxons and Jutes (known collectively as the Germanic tribes or Germans) posed a major threat to Rome's borders yet, at the same time, there was ongoing trade in both directions, Germans joined the Roman army and each culture was influenced by the other. Indeed, some of the Germanic tribes adopted Christianity as their religion and toward the end of the 4th Century, when the Huns from Central Asia invaded Eastern Europe vast numbers of Germans sought and were granted refuge within the borders of Rome.

Around the turn of the century, not happy with how they were being treated by Roman officials, the Germans went on the rampage and did not stop until they captured and destroyed Rome itself in 410.

With that the Western Roman Empire collapsed.¹ Armies from outlying parts of the Empire had been recalled to defend Rome leaving the territories they governed in chaos. Germanic tribes moved in to fill the vacuum. The Ostrogoths took over Northern Italy, the Visigoths Spain, The Franks and Burgundians France, the Vandals North Africa and the Angles, Saxons and Jutes Roman Britain. By the middle of the 5th Century the Western Empire was confined to Italy. Even there its Emperors were puppet kings controlled by the Germans and by the end of the century it had vanished altogether.

More Power To The Bishop Of Rome

The Germans were not the only ones to take advantage of the power vacuum created when Rome fell.

Because the German invaders were largely Christian the one Roman institution that had been allowed to survive was the Catholic Church. The new Germanic masters of mainland Western Europe may have had military strength but they did not have the ability to govern properly and had to rely heavily on their more educated subjects to supply them with civil servants and advisors. Many of these were found among the bishops. The power of the church increased.

While this was happening the power and influence of the bishop of Rome also increased. At the beginning of the 5th Century Innocent I had made it a rule that no important decision should be taken by the churches in the West without the knowledge and approval of the bishop of Rome. His successor, Leo I, went further. He put forward the idea that the Lord had appointed Peter as senior bishop and final court of appeal for the whole church and that that role had been passed on to his successors, the bishops of Rome. He declared that no-one

¹ The Eastern Empire, ruled from Constantinople, continued for another 1000 years. From this point on it was known as the Byzantine Empire.

had a right to question a decision taken by the bishop of Rome. So, at the same time as the church was gaining political power and influence throughout Europe the bishops of Rome were increasingly claiming to be the highest authority in the church.

By the beginning of the 6th Century the title Patriarch of Rome had been changed to Pope.

Meanwhile Back In Britain

Christianity had come to Roman Britain even before the days of Constantine and was well established by the beginning of the 5th Century but it barely survived the fall of Rome. When the Roman armies withdrew Britain fell into a state of anarchy.

The Angles, Saxons and Jutes invaded, pursuing a policy which in modern terminology would be called “ethnic cleansing”. Like the Vandals who invaded North Africa in similar fashion they were pagans. They brought their own religion with them and wiped out Christianity as they went.²

God Prepares His Man

Sometime in the early 5th Century somewhere in Roman Britain a 16 year-old named Sucat was captured by raiders who sold him to a tribal leader in Antrim. He had been brought up in a well-to-do family. His father was a Roman-British aristocrat, a town councillor and land owner and the boy had been instructed in the Christian faith for His father was also a deacon in the church and his grandfather a bishop.

He was put to work as a herdsman —at Slemish in County Antrim according to tradition — and it was during that time that his thoughts turned to God.

“I fed cattle every day, and often during the day I prayed; the love and fear of God burned more and more within me. My faith and spirit grew strong ... I prayed up to a hundred prayers a day. I would wake to pray before dawn in all weather: snow, frost or rain and I felt no harm as I now realise the Spirit was within me.”

From then on he took the name Patricius (Patrick). After six years Patrick escaped to France where he joined a monastery but at the age of about 30 a vision called him back to Ireland to evangelise its Celtic population. To this he devoted the rest of his life.

“I saw a man coming, as it were from Ireland. His name was Victoricus, and he carried many letters, and he gave me one of them. I read the heading: “The Voice of the Irish”. As I began the letter, I imagined in that moment that I heard the voice of those very people who were near the wood of Foclut, which is beside the western sea — and they cried out, as with one voice: “We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us.””

There may have been some Christians in Ireland before the time of Patrick but it was through his missionary labours that God transformed the island.

“I am greatly in debt to God who has bestowed his grace on me so largely, that many people were born again to God through me. The Irish who never had the knowledge of God and worshipped only idols and unclean things, have now become the Lord’s people, and are called sons of God.”

Most of Patrick’s missionary work was in the North of Ireland. He writes of battling with the supernatural powers of paganism, baptising thousands, ordaining clerics everywhere and living under threat of imprisonment and death.

All this is taken from letters thought to have been written by Patrick himself and generally believed to be authentic. There is much more that has been added to the story from “tradition”.

² They practiced animal and human sacrifice and worshipped Wodin as their chief god, Tiwaz the god of war, Thor the god of thunder, Saeter the water-god and Freya goddess of fertility as well as the sun and moon.

It is thought that it was Patrick who established Armagh as the ecclesiastical centre of Ireland but this, like much of the information we have about him, is open to question. There are legends which cannot be substantiated: stories linking him to various locations, tales of how he drove the snakes out of Ireland and how he used the Shamrock to explain the doctrine of the Trinity and many others.

The Celtic Church

Ireland was the only western country to escape invasion by the Germanic tribes. Beginning with Patrick in the 5th Century, and in isolation from Rome, it developed a thriving Christian civilisation. Monasteries, education, art, poetry and theology all flourished till it came to be known as the land of saints and scholars.

The Celtic Church was built around monasteries which were quite unlike the monasteries of Europe where monks sought seclusion from the world. The Celtic monasteries were simple stone or wooden structures. At the centre was a church and around it there were schoolrooms and huts for the monks who were builders, preachers and teachers. There were additional dwellings for students and others who attached themselves to the monastery which, in time, grew into a small village. The usual method for planting a new church was for an abbot with a group of 12 monks to move to a new location and establish a monastery of this type.

Most often the monasteries were sited where groups of people had already gathered: at or near sites of pagan worship or the villages of the 150 kings who ruled the clans of Ireland. Often they came under the patronage of the king. Each monastery was self-governed. Abbots were more powerful than bishops and bishops had no fixed dioceses but travelled from place to place.

Irish Missions

In the 6th Century and beyond Celtic missionaries brought the gospel to Scotland, England, and parts of France, Belgium, Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Beginning in the monasteries of Ireland (places like Clonard, Clonmacnoise and Devenish) the Celtic missionary movement went on to establish missionary training centres in Iona and Lindisfarne. Names associated with the movement include those of Columba, born in Donegal, Columbanus the pupil of Comgall of Bangor recognised as one of the most learned men of his age and Aidan of Lindisfarne.

No To Rome Rule

When, in 597, Pope Gregory I sent Augustine, a Benedictine monk, and forty other Roman missionaries to evangelise the English, their work, which was centred in Canterbury, also met with success. They were never as successful as the Celts and when Gregory appointed Augustine archbishop of the English and tried to bring the Celtic churches under his own authority he met strong resistance. The resulting conflict continued until the late 7th Century when most of England finally accepted the views of the Roman Church.

There are those who would like to believe that this was a conflict between protestant-minded Celts and Roman Catholicism but that was not the case. The main points of dispute between the Celtic and Roman churches concerned the date on which Easter should be celebrated and whether monks should have a circular or semicircular tonsure.

Roman Catholicism as it was at the time of the Reformation had not yet fully developed. Even though the bishops of Rome were claiming greater authority there was still one Catholic Church overseen by five patriarchs that spanned East and West. Even if the church in the West did acknowledge the supremacy of Rome the Eastern part of the church did not, there were no indulgences, there was no icon veneration, no transubstantiation and no special claims regarding Mary. We cannot really speak of Roman Catholicism until after the division of the Eastern and Western churches in 1054 and we cannot speak of Protestantism until the time of the Reformation.

Nice Story But Is It True?

To study the story of Patrick and Celtic Christianity is to come up against blatant dishonesty on all sides. Different accounts are given by different historians according to the various positions they represent. At the extremes, Roman Catholic historians will represent Patrick as a bishop appointed by Rome to evangelise the Irish and establish a diocesan structure in Ireland whilst some evangelical writers would almost have you believe he was a militant Protestant. Some argue that he had no association with Armagh at all — that story, they say, was a fabrication of those who wanted to establish Armagh as the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland. Some say there were two Patricks and others that he never existed at all.

It is one of the problems with the study of Church history: those who preserved the records often had an interest in preserving only one point of view or one side of an argument. The amazing thing is that in spite of the scheming and dishonesty of men God has preserved his church and it continues to grow. Whether or not Patrick brought the gospel to Ireland, someone did. God had his man, or men, ready and prepared at just the right time. He always does. Kingdoms and Empires rise and fall but the work of God never falters.

For Further Study

Read Psalm 2 and Daniel 2:31 – 45 in the light of this study. How do these passages relate to what we have been learning?