

Start with a bit of history – yesterday was the feast day of St Ninian of Galloway. Why does history matter? -depends on who you are. When I arrived in Brisbane in the 1970s, people of Irish-catholic origin were still talking of the ill-treatment of the Irish by the English in the famine years, 130 years earlier, which was what had driven their ancestors to come to Australia. Yet those same people denied there had ever been massacres of Aborigines in Queensland only 70 or 80 years earlier, and, if pushed, would say “it happened a long time ago and it’s time to forgive and forget.” It all depends on perspective, and I believe it is important to know something of our history, including the history of British Christianity, which is the history of the Anglican church to which we belong.

When Jesus was alive in Palestine, Britain was not part of the Roman empire, but it was invaded and conquered progressively from 53AD on, and eventually all of what is now England and Wales became a Roman province. Scotland was never occupied, with the boundary roughly at the current border, though it fluctuated over the years. Christianity spread in southern Britain just as it did elsewhere in the Roman empire, but with little persecution of Christians and only one recorded martyr, St Alban, who died some time in the 3rd century AD. After Christianity became the state religion under Emperor Constantine, Christians became increasingly visible, and by the time the Roman legions left Britain in early 410, there was a thriving church.

For the next 100 years, Britain remained largely Christian, and continued prosperous, traded with Gaul and Spain as well as across the Irish Sea to Ireland, and ruled by local kings who spoke Celtic (essentially the same language as Welsh, Cornish and Breton) and wrote of themselves as British.

Coastal areas were increasingly subject to raids from Saxons and Scots from Ireland, but inland areas remained peaceful and prosperous – and Christian - right through into 500AD and past. Contacts were maintained with the Gaulish church; bishops Germanus and Lupus from Auxerre visited Britain in 429, including the shrine of St Alban in Verulamium, and visited again in c 445.

St Ninian was born around 350 AD, into this prosperous civilised and largely stable society, in Cumbria, just south of the western end of Hadrian’s wall. As an adult, he went north into Galloway in SW Scotland as an apostle/ missionary to the Picts and British of Galloway. He established his centre at Whithorn (Candida Casa) on the extreme southern coast of Galloway, and lived there till his death in 432.

Only 3 saints from Britain before 600AD are remembered in our church calendar – Ninian, Patrick and David of Wales, (as well as the early martyr Alban). Consequently when we talk of the Celtic church, people think of Columba and Aidan from Ireland, and even Cuthbert of Lindisfarne and Hilda of Whitby, though these latter two were Saxon, not Celtic, even if they were converted by the Celtic church.

Yet Ninian and Patrick were both born into the well-established and prosperous Christian community in Cumbria. Patrick was born shortly before 400AD, and probably knew Ninian who was 20 to 30 years older. Patrick was captured by raiders and taken to Ireland as a slave, escaped then trained in monastic schools in Gaul, and went back to Ireland as a

missionary bishop in c. 432, the same year that Ninian died. Patrick was well educated, in classical style, received formal ecclesiastical education, ordained deacon then bishop.

Strathclyde (an independent kingdom around Glasgow), was clearly Christian when their king Coroticus was written to by Patrick c. 440. There is evidence of several Christian communities along the Galloway coast c. 450-500, presumably partly the result of Ninian's work.

At the same time, Darlugdach from Ireland, a pupil of St Brigid and later Abbess of Kildare, founded a church at Abernethy near Perth in central Scotland (In fact, this and Glastonbury are rivals for the oldest continuous church site in Britain). There is a tomb of a bishop in Peebles dating from about 500, and the British Christian chronicler Gildas was born in Clydeside in 500 to a Christian family. St Kentigern (or Mungo) who founded the church in Glasgow, was a native of Lothian in SE Scotland, born in the 500s to a Christian community there. There was also a St Serf in Fife, Scotland in the 500s.

So by 500AD, there were thriving Christian communities throughout southern Scotland as well as in Ireland – long before Columba founded Iona in 563.

Why then do we remember Columba and Aidan, and Patrick of Ireland, but forget their predecessors and contemporaries in southern Scotland and northern England? Primarily because of the big failure of the British church to make any serious attempt to convert the invading Saxons.

As the pagan Saxons raided and then settled, the British progressively retreated – to the north into Scotland, west to Wales, and overseas to Brittany. Yet archeological evidence showed that many stayed, even if as serfs and slaves, but none of the Saxon kingdoms were converted by the British living among them, or none that is recorded. The first record of Christianity among the Saxons who settled in south-east Britain was Queen Bertha from France, a Christian who in 580AD married King Ethelbert of Kent. She brought her chaplain with her and it is worth noting that they used the chapel of St Martin in Canterbury which had been a Christian chapel in Roman times, which implies a continuing Christian presence in Kent over the 170 year gap since the legions left in 410AD.

It was her influence on her husband the king that led to the arrival in 592 of St Augustine with the missionaries from Rome (ie from Christian southern Europe). Then her daughter Aethelburg, sister of King Eadbald of Kent, married Edwin King of Northumbria before 625 and brought her chaplain Paulinus north with her. Oswald, the next king of Northumbria, born 604, was converted to Christianity when in exile in Argyll in south-west Scotland as a youth. So Christianity had reached the Anglian kingdoms of north-east England well before Aidan arrived in 635. Cuthbert was born in Northumbria in 635, same year Aidan came there, and brought up as a Christian.

To sum up, Patrick, brought up as a wealthy upper-class Christian in Cumbria, went back as a free man to convert the Irish who had captured and enslaved him. Ninian was the apostle to the Scots, Patrick to the Irish, David to the Welsh, but where was the apostle to the Saxons? A hundred years later, the AngloSaxons of Northumbria were converted by Christians from

southern Scotland, and the Saxons of the extreme south-east by the king of Kent's Christian wife and the missionaries from Europe, but there is no record of any earlier apostle to the Saxons of the south, east and central England.

There is a tendency these days to hero-worship the Celtic church, but we should also remember the signal failure of the British (therefore Celtic) Christians, from 450 to 600, to make any real attempt to bring the gospel to the Saxons who had taken over their land. It seems likely that their failure to reach out to the heathen mob who had slaughtered and enslaved them was essentially a failure to forgive, a failure to understand that God's mercy extended even to these pagan murderers.

This is the link to the theme in today's gospel - forgiveness – that **because** God has done so much for all of us, we in turn must forgive those who have wronged us. Just as the Jews still remember today how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt, and from Pharaoh's army, so we must remember God's great gift of eternal life, and thereby of rescue from the chaos and confusion of this world; of being held prisoner to fears, to slavery to pride, or status, or money.

Jesus in his parable talked of "ten thousand talents of silver". A single talent was about 20 years wages for a labourer, so by ten thousand talents Jesus was saying an unimaginably large amount, something that no-one could ever pay back. The amount the other man owed was still a lot of money; a denarius was a day's wage, and he owed a hundred, but it was manageable. Jesus meant our debt to God is enormous, beyond any possible measurement and certainly beyond anything we could ever pay back. As the hymn says "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small"

God's love and forgiveness has no limits; it is offered to all, regardless of our apathy, sinfulness, pride, whatever.

And our love must have no limits either. The early British Christians in the grief and fear of their defeat by the Saxons in effect wrote the Saxons off – considered them outside God's mercy. Perhaps they felt they were unworthy of God's love, outside the pale – "do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs" (Matt 7:6).

But we must never think this of anyone – God's love is for all, and no-one is unworthy. Maggie Wooley in her Daily Reflection on Friday quoted C S Lewis 'Human beings judge one another by their external actions. God judges them by their moral choices'. 'We see only the results which a man's choices make out of his raw material. But God does not judge him on the raw material, but on what he has done with it'.

We maybe should not judge the situation of the British Christians in the 100 or so years after they had been invaded and driven out by the Saxons, but the results of their inaction was to delay the arrival of Christianity by 200 years or more, and perhaps also lead to the conflict between the Celtic and Roman churches.

The message of Jesus' words in today's gospel is this: God's love is for all, and none are unworthy. We have been given a huge and undeserved gift, and we must give this back to

our fellow humans by showing love that does not distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy.

I will finish by repeating today's collect: