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EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN THE DARENT VALLEY

G.W. MEATES

Christianity is a faith of the widest significance and enters deeply into the human conscience.

Such a faith takes a long time to grow, depending as it does on the soil upon which it falls. And so, when we consider the small part of the earth's surface with which we are concerned, we need to understand the environment in which this small plant of the mind grew and developed.

Our knowledge of religious concepts in prehistoric Britain is exceedingly sparse. It seems clear that the heavens, with sun and moon, provided a strong impetus to thought. They moved, and the reason for their differing gyrations certainly attracted the closest attention of those ancient people, who seem to have attached a great deal of importance from what they saw to what they were. The mystery of life was intimately joined to the mystery of the skies.

The concept of life after death seems to have entered the human philosophy (if such a term might be deemed to apply at so early a time) well before the Bronze Age. Burial mounds thrown up at great trouble and labour have often been found to contain objects that must have been of much value to the dead individual in his lifetime, and which might be supposed to support him in some sort of existence in the next world – for human beings have always faced with horror the prospect of oblivion. Caesar tells us a little of pagan superstition; how the ruling ecclesiastics in this island, as in Gaul, made forest clearings places of worship, made human sacrifice a frequent punishment, burned persons captured in raids and so established an authoritarian regime over ordinary people. The barbarism of a few exerted power over their many fellows under the invisible and compulsive gods exercising the mighty powers of nature.

Into this soil of adversity Christianity was slow to establish itself, especially among the people of the wild countryside, being those who

lived on little farms in a state of rural simplicity, in ignorance and in superstitious dread of their masters.

No two human beings are exactly alike, and to form a church upon a religious concept, some sort of organisation must be attempted and achieved. Rules of ritual and belief must be devised and accepted; wisdom and understanding must go to their making. Within a few decades of the death of their founder, his precepts had begun to spread over the Empire of Rome. By perhaps A.D. 200, Christianity was being preached in the province of Britain (Tertullian); and Origen, writing about A.D. 240, alludes to the Christian faith as a unifying force among the Britons, though many had as yet not heard of the Gospel. So, as early as this, we cannot say that any real organisation had begun in this distant land on the verge of the Empire; but something had begun. The faith was strong enough to capture the mind, especially of a man like St. Alban who was martyred in the third century for the firmness of his belief.

The records that we have of Christianity in Britain are at this early date sparse; but they are sufficient to assume that the faith was firmly rooted in this island before the Peace of the Church was established. In A.D. 312, Constantine the Great was converted to Christianity and by the Edict of Milan gave peace to the Christian church. The faith was officially recognised through much of the Empire, though belief and reliance on the pagan gods was not significantly lessened, especially in country districts. It is likely that Constantine regarded the new religion as a unifying force in the political sense; a central pivot for his Empire, rather than as a religious movement only – he himself was not baptised until the approach of death, a quarter of a century later.

But much was done during his reign towards a firm organisation of the church and the suppression of heresy. Only two years after his conversion, a Council of the Western episcopate was held at Arles and three bishops from Britain attended – Restitutus of London, Eborius of York and Adelphus of what was probably Colchester. The last of these three bishops was accompanied by a priest and a deacon. Was the bishop of Colchester the primate of Roman Britain? Colchester was the senior Roman *colonia* of the province.

Here we come to the direct evidence that Britain was by then at least to a certain extent organised into areas governed in the sphere of religion by bishops – later to become episcopal sees. But of Christianity in rural places we know very little. Some mosaic pavements have come to light, with a church in a town and one house-church in a villa, and this suggests it was the more well-to-do who became inclined to embrace the new faith; the majority of country folk seem to have continued ignorant in their pagan tradition.

Once more there is evidence. In A.D. 325 the church in Britain accepted the definitions and decrees of the Council of Nicea, and in A.D. 359 British bishops attended the Council of Ariminium, though three of them seemed too poor to make the journey without the help of Imperial funds. It is clear that the church was by now well organised, though plagued with heresies, and we come to the earliest positive evidence of its existence in the lowland zone of Britain – in our Kent valley of the Darent.

People do not seem to realise that the history of Christian worship begins here and has been practically continuous from the last decades of the fourth century to the present day. It covers 1600 years of our civilisation. From now on, therefore, we will concentrate on this valley and its Christianity. Excavation of the Roman villa at Lullingstone, beginning in 1949 and continuing for thirteen years, revealed something that had not been anticipated. A room was discovered deep in the ground, filled with the collapsed debris of the room that had once existed above it. This consisted not only of the walls themselves, but of the painted plaster that had adorned those walls. Thousands of fragments were recovered, shattered in such a state that the most eminent archaeologist of the time gave his opinion that the huge jigsaw could never be re-assembled. He was wrong. Years of careful work by a few dedicated scholars did in fact result in the restoration of much of the shattered wall-plaster, and the scheme of decoration of the upper room came to light. Its Christianity was undoubted, and that the room had been devoted to Christian worship was clear. Rectangular in shape conforming to the villa design, and facing south-east, its west wall bore a compelling design, a roofed colonnade upon a flowered dado, with Christians standing between the columns, attired in the rich beaded robes of the late fourth century, with arms out-stretched in the attitude of prayer. These figures are thought to have been representations of the family who embraced Christianity about A.D. 350, their hair is of the same orange-red colour, they are of both sexes and are both young and old. One, indeed, a young man, has a curtain falling behind him, and when we compare this with certain carved *sarcophagi* from Roman sites in Gaul, it seems possible that he may have already been dead – perhaps the house-church was founded in his memory – the curtain suggestive of the change from this life to an eternal paradise. The walls of this room also included two *Chi Rho* diagrams, red on white and surrounded by wreaths of flowers and fruit, some 3 ft. in diameter. One was upon the south wall, amid people and gardens, while the other was recessed centrally in the east wall, towards which the worshippers gazed in a state of ecstatic prayer.

As the floor of the room had collapsed, no altar survived; but a

large block of red cement, its top slightly recessed, had fallen into the room below, and nearby was much burned wood, rafters and floor-boards, and among them was one fragment of carbonised wood, long, square and tapering, which could have been once a leg of a wooden altar, which might have stood upon the red cement *podium*. But it is the wall painting which declares the Christianity of this upper room, almost certainly a house-church under the overall roof of an otherwise secular residence.

Although fire had destroyed so much, another interesting object had fallen from the upper room. It was a small pottery vessel, bulbous in girth with a long neck, rendered on the exterior with a golden finish, typical in form with many such vessels potted in the fourth century. Possibly, it had been of ritual use when Christian services had been held in the house-church.

An ante-chamber or *narthex* led into the church, and its wall painting was also of great significance. Plaster from its south wall has survived, and upon it had been painted a great *Chi Rho*, as large as those in the church, the monogram red upon a white ground, surrounded by a large wreath of flowers and fruit; however, in this case with the *Alpha* and the *Omega* occupying their usual places between the spreading arms of the *Chi*. Perhaps, a room for the neophytes, not as yet complete members of the church.

Again, leading into this ante-chamber was a small, square vestibule, which, though undecorated, had an interesting connotation. The outer wall of the villa had been pierced to provide an entrance into the vestibule for persons living outside the house to attend the Christian rituals, and a wall had been constructed to prevent such persons from wandering forward into the private rooms of the building. Indeed, it may have been that by the end of the fourth century secular use of the villa may have given way to a purely ecclesiastic use of its northern part. This was indeed a church, the earliest known in the whole of the lowland area of Britain.

The age within which this church was founded, the length of time of its use, and when it ceased are established by numismatic evidence, coins sealed not only in the church rooms but in the area south of it, secure beneath the level of burnt material which represents the final destruction of the villa. The coins are different. Those on the south are essentially of the Emperor Gratian, whose reign ended in A.D. 383, while those beneath the Christian complex show no coins of Gratian, but are entirely of the House of Theodosius A.D. 379-423, two coins of his son Arcadius (who reigned from A.D. 395 to 408) being found buried with others of contemporary date down beneath the collapse of the church, and worn by use at that. So, we may date the Christian church from c. A.D. 383 to the first decade or two of the

fifth century, a comparatively short time which the freshness of the unburnt painting seems to confirm.

Another Christian church of this period may have existed at Otford, for a significant object recently came to light in a Roman context there. This was the centre of a *Chi Rho* painted in red on white plaster, of similar size to those at Lullingstone. Indeed, many of the inhabitants of villas in the valley may have embraced Christianity. We can only surmise through what has come to light.

There is another aspect of Christianity, its power. In spite of Julian's reorganisation of the West in favour of pagan gods, by the time of Theodosius, scarcely two decades later, the latter emperor was able to direct edicts throughout his empire for the extirpation of paganism in a final form. But this forbidding of pagan worship was not felt by those millions of ordinary people, whose folk memory could with difficulty be compelled to give way. This is apparent in the Lullingstone villa. There, the room below the Christian house-church had been dedicated to the worship of the triune water-spirits as long ago as the years of the Antonine dynasty – the three spirits are shown in human form in a painting on the south wall, and with a little well for the supply of water just in front of them. Again, after a period during which the house was deserted, new-comers re-edified this deep room for the reception of two fine marble busts of the second century, with pots sunk into the floor before them for libations in honour of those persons whose features were depicted in the marble. So, once again this deep room became a place of pagan ritual. And above this was placed the Christian house-church; but this is not the most interesting thing. Throughout the period of Christian worship above, the pagan adoration continued below, until the very end. So here is one of those rare surviving examples of pagan worship continuing unaffected by Christianity. It suggests that worship of ancient gods and spirits continued strongly while the Christian faith was receiving its empire-wide organisation. Perhaps, by now many people no longer knew what to believe, and needed positive advice as to how their faith should go. Pagan beliefs died hard. By the time of Augustine's mission to Britain in A.D. 597, Christianity on the Roman model had to be re-introduced, though something of it yet remained, notably at Canterbury. His master Pope Gregory the Great, who could scarcely have known much about distant Britain, yet noted in his instructions that the temples there must not be destroyed, but that their idols be removed, and they, the buildings, should be adopted with suitable lustrations, as Christian churches. In the Lullingstone Roman villa the selection of the room over the place of pagan ritual for that of Christian worship may have some significance in this connection; but the positioning of a church, small

though it was, in Anglo-Saxon times over the remains of the second pagan temple on the terrace behind the villa is surely not a coincidence. The folk memory may well have persisted, the fragmentary Roman building almost certainly still emerged from the earth, and the church was constructed largely of Roman bricks and tiles.

The collapse of Roman authority, though not of manners, early in the fifth century seems to have included the partial cessation of Roman Christianity in Britain, hence the necessity of Augustine's mission in 597. But memory in the countryside was long; there is little doubt that 'remembrance of things past' continued in the minds of many. Christianity was extirpated from the Darent valley as the fifth century progressed; not perhaps because the Teutonic barbarians recognised it as a danger to their settlement, but because, as with barbarians of all centuries, including our own, lack of understanding begets destruction.

Light comes upon us as the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms became established, when the past became important. The memory of a civilisation remained in the minds of many men. The certainty of a liberating god, a first purpose of truth that could be approached through a veil of ignorance, took a hold. Churches began to be constructed, small and probably of simple materials, wattle, daub and thatch. Not one of these survives, though it is interesting to think about them. For Christianity was not entirely wiped out by the Teutonic settlers who took the position once occupied by the Roman civilisation. Even when Augustine arrived, in places the faith seems almost certainly to have persisted. But it had to be organised once more into the fold of Rome; that was the job of Augustine and his immediate successors. And success attended the effort. The influence of building passed from across the Channel during the Anglo-Saxon consolidation of Britain, and stone slowly replaced the fragile buildings where the ritual of Christianity had been adopted, often in places that had quite recently been devoted to the worship of nature and its gods. Little of this new building is observable in the Darent valley; modern scholars allocate such a building as Darent church to the Norman period; and we know, or think we know, that the church by the river at Dartford is of the Conqueror's time. But a thoughtful man realises that what is stated as a fact today may easily be shown false tomorrow.

There is a much more important matter to investigate. Communications and boundaries. We must consider the aspect of the valley from century to century in Roman and early Christian times. They surely differed. To the Romans a river was a highway, better than a muddy road if it was kept regularly dredged and banked; and because of the villas or farm buildings that lay upon its banks the river

had to be organised and kept in an orderly fashion to serve the successive establishments, the transport of grain would necessitate secure organisation of the river along which it was conveyed.

Change is endemic in human affairs. So it was with the Darent valley. Roman rule went, and with it went civilised living. Care of the river ceased, and as the years passed it became blocked and lagooned back, a swamp through which the river still found its way. But it still had to be crossed, at the points where the fords had existed in Roman times, and it still may be observed how such fords persisted into the Dark Age and were still evident in the years of the Anglo-Saxon settlement. And here at the fords stood the simple places where a Christian might give his thanks for a safe crossing in the floods of winter. All along the valley, at equal intervals, the remains of Roman inhabitation stand near these fords; and today, in proximity to many such ancient buildings, Christian churches guard those same crossings of what once had been an intractable obstacle to man's urgent desire to move, to change, to cross.

Centuries ago, perhaps as early as the reign of King Alfred, the face of England was beginning to be covered by Christian parishes, and here in the Darent valley we see it, its boundaries passing from west to east across the land. Even today they do so; an examination of a large scale map will show it. And it is remarkable how close to those Roman places are the churches guarding the fords. And also how near the Roman farms, if we can so describe them, were to each other. Their estates (or *villas* as we should properly call them) must have extended from west to east, including arable land, valley lands for the animals, woodland on the east for fuel and material for making things.

Can we equate these very ancient estate boundaries with those delimiting the Christian parishes? It seems very likely. If one examines the land with care and understanding, in several places banks and mounds can be found along parts of the parish boundaries. Nobody has attempted by controlled excavation to determine if such vestiges go back into Roman times. But when laying out a parish boundary, it seems that the surveyors tended to use such banks and ditches for their purpose, as they found them. Intentions continually change in human affairs; but the foundations for building or laying out areas more often than not bring into use things that already exist. This is an area of research which has scarcely been touched upon; it invites the attention of a scholar who has academic ambitions.

A short conspectus of the rise of Christianity in Britain has been given, and especially of its antiquity here in the Darent valley. Allusion to fords and boundaries has been presented; the vital importance of the Christian faith has informed what has been written.

May it be hoped that the faith will survive these dreadful decades that are bringing the twentieth century to a close, and that worship without hypocrisy will continue in the churches of the valley.

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