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*Caractacus, the famous British chieftain, making his plea for liberty before the Roman Senate. (A.D. 51.)*

ALMOST the last words of Jesus to His disciples, as He bade them farewell upon the mount of Olives, were, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15), and the infant church lost no time in applying itself to this task.

Seizing the opportunity of Pentecost, when devout Jews from all parts of the Roman Empire were assembled in Jerusalem, Peter preached the first missionary sermon to representatives of at least thirteen different sections of the known world. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and dwellers in Mesopotamia from the north-east are mentioned. Arabians had come from the south-west. Asia Minor to the north was represented by Jews and proselytes from Phrygia and Pamphylia, Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia. There were pilgrims from Crete in the Mediterranean Sea, from Libya and Egypt in North Africa, and even strangers from Rome, the centre of the Empire. (Acts 2:9-11.)

Three thousands souls responded to that first appeal, and dur-

ing the following days thousands more accepted the message of the Gospel. As these separated after the feast and returned to their various homes, they carried with them the good news of salvation, and began to raise up churches in the very uttermost parts of the Empire.

#### *Scattered Abroad*

Some three or four years after that eventful Pentecost, Stephen, the first martyr of the church, laid down his life for the faith, and a great persecution arose in Jerusalem. This resulted in another exodus of believers, carrying the Gospel with them into other parts. (Acts 8:1.)

In the thirteenth chapter of Acts we find that Antioch, the Græco-Syrian capital of the East, had become a centre from which evangelists were being sent forth into the regions beyond, along the great trade routes which radiated in all directions from that city. Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark received their commissions, under God, from the church at Antioch and spread the message over Asia, Greece, Macedonia, and southern Europe as far as Rome, and perhaps even farther afield.

# Britain's First Evangelists

*Part Two of the Great New Series,  
"Did Rome Convert Britain?"*

*By W. L. Emmerson*

In the second century Alexandria became another centre from whence proceeded missionary pioneers into all the earth.

It is not, therefore, unreasonable to suppose that some of these fervent Christian missionaries penetrated the forests of Gaul, found themselves on the shores of the narrow channel which separated the wild islands of the Britanni from the mainland, and crossed over to carry the good news of salvation there also.

#### *Who Were the First Evangelists?*

There are many legends and traditions which suggest different leaders of the early church as the pioneers of the Gospel in Britain.

A large number of authorities declare that the apostle Paul himself visited Britain. Theodoret, for example, an ecclesiastical historian of the early fifth century, writes:

"Paul, liberated from his captivity at Rome, preached the Gospel to the Britons and others in the West."

We know that Paul planned to visit Spain (Rom. 15:24), and there are several years of his life between his first and second captivities of which we have no record. So that it is within the bounds of possibility that dur-

ing this period the apostle did fulfil his intention to visit that country and perhaps even extended his journeyings as far as these isles. Whatever the truth may be the Rev. R. W. Morgan, author of *St. Paul in Britain*, says ironically that there is at least more evidence of Paul's visit to Britain than of Peter's ever having been in Rome!

Another group of ancient records identify the Christian worker Aristobulus, whose family is mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Romans, as one of the pioneers of the Gospel in Britain. Thus *The Menologies [Martyrologies] of the Greek Church* state:

"Aristobulus was one of the seventy disciples, and a follower of St. Paul the apostle, with whom he preached the Gospel to the whole world, and ministered to him. He was chosen by St. Paul to be the missionary bishop to the land of Britain, inhabited by a very warlike and fierce race, by whom he was often scourged and repeatedly dragged as a criminal through their towns. Yet he converted many of them to Christianity; and after he had built churches and ordained deacons and priests for the island, he was there martyred."

Still a third group of traditions cluster round the ancient abbey of Glastonbury which, according to its earliest historian, William of Malmesbury, was founded by Joseph of Arimathea and eleven companions. The story tells that the twelve pioneers arrived in England somewhere about the middle of the first century and received, at the hands of King Arviragus, the island site now called Glastonbury, comprising twelve "ploughs" of land. Here was built a simple wattle structure, the first church building in the kingdom. From this centre they preached the Gospel to the surrounding peoples and here all died and were buried. The charter of Ina says of Glastonbury:

"This is the city which was the fountain and origin of Christ's religion in Britain, built by Christ's disciples."

It is perhaps impossible now to separate truth from fiction in the hundreds of legends and stories which have been handed down through the centuries, but the fact that they have grown up must indicate a basis of truth upon which they could be built. That basis must be that in the very earliest days of the church some of those first Christians scattered abroad turned in the direction of these isles and succeeded in planting the Gospel in the hearts of some of its then heathen inhabitants.

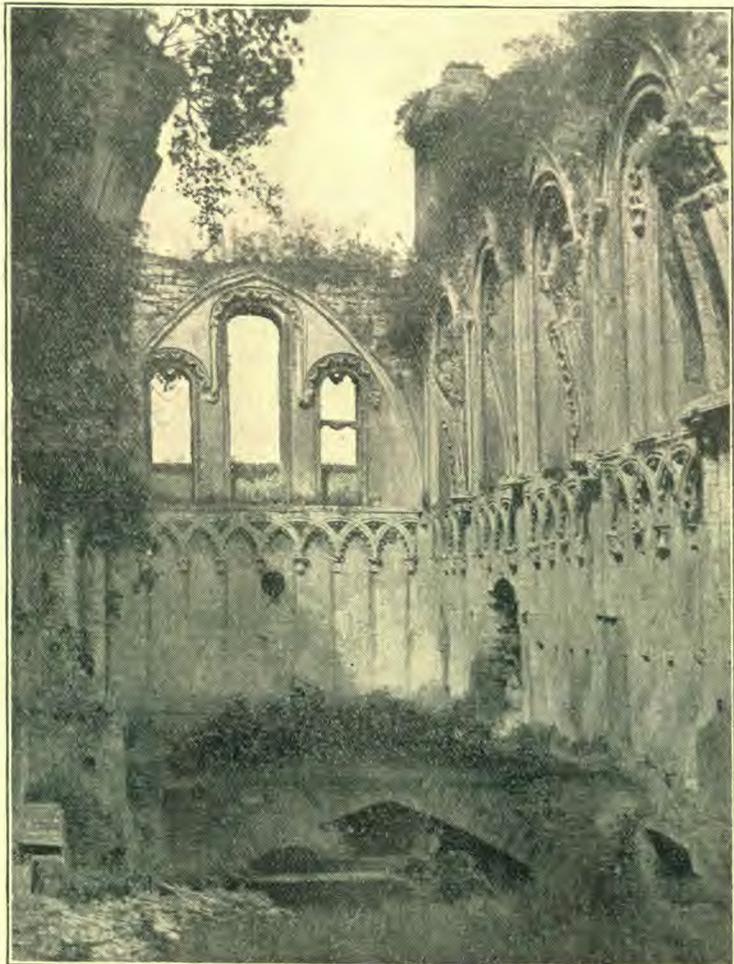
Robert Parsons, the Jesuit, to

whose book, *The Three Conversions of England*, we have previously referred, is constrained to admit that:

"It seems nearest the truth that the British church was originally planted by Grecian teachers such as came from the East."—*Vol. 1, page 15.*

#### Soldier Missionaries

Another avenue through which the Gospel entered Britain was undoubtedly the Roman military system. When Christianity was launched upon the world Britain was perhaps the most talked-about country in the empire, for the simple reason that it was putting up the greatest resistance of any country to the Roman arms. Julius Cæsar's two invasions in



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St. Joseph's Chapel, Glastonbury, said to have been founded by Joseph of Arimathea.

55 and 54 B.C. had carried him only as far as Verulam or St. Albans. There a treaty was concluded, the Romans evacuated the land leaving not a soldier behind, and did not set foot upon British soil for nearly a century. Thus in the middle of the first century Britain was the only independent nation in Western Europe. When, therefore, in the reign of Claudius Cæsar, Rome determined to subjugate this one free race Britain became the centre of the military interests of the empire.

It would be incredible therefore if its possibilities as a mission field had not aroused noble spirits in the early church to conquer it also for the cross.

That the emissaries of the Gospel did succeed in penetrating ahead of and beyond the limits of the Roman operations is endorsed by Tertullian's statement:

"The regions of Britain which have never been penetrated by the Roman arms have received the religion of Christ."—*"Dei Fidei,"* page 179.

The Roman principle of transporting the fighting men of conquered peoples to distant parts of the empire also facilitated the spread of the Gospel. British troops were deported to almost every land under Roman rule, while the troops used to garrison this country were drawn from Belgium, Gaul, Spain, Macedonia, Thrace, and many other parts. There were many Christians among these, and these soldier-missionaries stationed all over the conquered territory constituted a most important channel through which the Gospel was communicated to the native peoples.

#### *Christian Colonists*

Then there were the Roman colonists who flocked into the land in the wake of the conquering legions. London, as early as

A.D. 53, had over 80,000 Roman citizens, and elsewhere over Roman Britain there were other smaller settlements, each, no doubt, with its proportion of adherents of the new faith, who would seek every opportunity to spread the message of the Gospel among the natives.

#### *Returned Captives Carry Gospel*

Thousands of military captives were taken to Rome by the various Roman consuls who successively served in Britain. Most of these were ruthlessly given to the lions to provide sport on Roman holidays, or forced to kill each other in gladiatorial combat. But some were spared and came back to their native land after a longer or shorter sojourn in Rome. Might not some of these also have accepted the Gospel during their captivity, for there was a considerable church there at this time, and carried it

back with them on their return?

The story is preserved that Caractacus, the noble British king who was treacherously betrayed into the hands of Rome and whose great speech before the Senate gained for him his life, was converted with his family during his seven years of "free custody" in the capital. And the church of St. Pudenciana in Rome is still pointed out as marking the site of the Gentile church established in the household of his daughter, who married a Roman senator and remained behind in Rome.

In these ways, therefore, and not primarily through the mission of Augustine and his forty companions, was the Gospel planted and established in our land.

(Next Time: "*Persecuted Yet Triumphant.*")