

Of the many appalling things committed recently in the news, I'm sure we were all very shocked at the destruction of the remains of the ancient city of Nimrod by the Islamic State fanatics in Iraq. This is or was a city so ancient it even appears in the Old Testament, but it was wiped out with sledgehammers and explosives in the name of a conquering new form of religion just last month.

And we are rightly all shocked at that sort of barbarism. What the militants are trying to do, which is what people always try to do in a revolution, is to erase not just artefacts but to erase people's actual memories. What they are destroying is the past both physically and mentally. It is cultural vandalism but it is also intellectual vandalism too, trying to destroy any trace of past ideas, past beliefs, past spirituality. Not the sort of thing we associate with our own religion of course, and rightly so.

But there was a time however when Christianity was the new religious movement, when it burst into the scene and had to find ways to deal with the other religions it encountered, when it too had to deal with the legacy of older beliefs. To cut a long story short, but not to conclude the entire sermon just yet, I want to explain why the Christians who first came here to Crowhurst some time in the 7th or 8th century decided not to cut down the venerable old yew tree that was growing here, assuming it is indeed 2,600 years old, and which certainly had some pagan religious symbolism, but instead decided to incorporate it within their own worship space.

Because one of the few things we know about pagan worship is that a lot of their religion was based around trees and groves. Giant specimens of long-lived trees, like the one we have growing outside this building, crop up again and again in tales of Norse, Celtic and Germanic paganism, such as Yggdrasil the giant ash or yew tree in Scandinavia, or Thor's oak in Germany. We know this partly because of the stories of the first missionaries in mainland Europe, who took great delight in finding these ancient holy places of the pagans - and then destroying them.

In one story St Martin in France tried to cut down an ancient evergreen tree that the locals venerated as their god. They refused to let him do it unless he stood next to the tree in the direction it was likely to fall, in the hope that it would fall on him and crush him. So a bit of a conflict going on there, and needless to say in the story St Martin manages to deflect the falling tree from crushing him by a miracle.

The missionary Boniface did much the same thing in Germany. There he cut down the huge ancient tree called Thor's Oak which local pagans had venerated for many centuries. He then used the pile of wood from the tree to build a church, which is a good way to make a point I suppose. Everywhere you go across mainland Europe you hear the same sort of story, the ancient trees cut down, the groves burned, the pagan temples ransacked and destroyed.

This destruction of the pagan landscape demonstrates I'm sure you will agree a rather unfortunately aggressive attitude towards the ancient beliefs of our ancestors. Indeed today we commemorate St George, who is of course depicted as a soldier literally killing a dragon. This is once again a symbol of religious conflict, St

George the Christian warrior destroying the forces of paganism as represented by the rather unfortunate lizard.

And then you come to the British Isles, and things suddenly look very different indeed. There are no stories of trees being cut down. There are no church decrees condemning the veneration of ancient oaks, pines or yews. So while Christians all over Europe were busy decimating the flora and fauna in the name of the new religion, something rather different happened when they got to the British Isles.

For one thing we didn't have any dragons as such. When St Patrick got to Ireland he did cast out the snakes, as you may know from Christian legend, which amounts to much the same allegorical tale as St George with his dragon.

But when it came to the sacred trees, nothing happened. There is no record anywhere of people destroying the ancient natural landscape of Britain or Ireland in the name of the new religion. Which is rather good news for us here today, and I think something that we in the churches of Britain should celebrate.

The reason why we thankfully decided to spare our ancient trees is because the church in the British Isles developed amid something of a vacuum. Shortly after the Roman Empire collapsed there was a period of about 200 years in which British Christians were cut off to a large extent from the rest of the Christian world. And what was happening in Europe was that the church was fast becoming a power structure, a part of the state government, an instrument used by kings and princes. It was turning into an official religion. It had the might and power and confidence of entire armies behind it. No wonder it was prepared to go and hack down the pagan landscapes. It was powerful and successful, nothing could stand in its way.

I'm not entirely sure that is what Jesus envisaged for his church however. And when the Christian missionaries came to Britain and Ireland they certainly tried a different tack. Rather than bashing people over the head with the new religion, they decided to see if they could make it work in terms the local people would understand and relate to on a very deep level. So from the very beginning they set up their churches right next to the ancient trees. The three main early churches in Ireland were and still are at places called Derry, Durrow and Kildare. All of these three contain the word Der, which is the Old Irish word for oak tree. Kildare in particular translates as 'church of the oak'.

When the church in Britain finally became a part of the country's power structure, once the kings and queens had been converted and the church was busy operating alongside the state, it was too late to turn the clock back. All our ancient trees had acquired a new Christian meaning, and so they were safe from attack. You might know the story that Joseph of Arimathea came to England and planted his staff in the ground at Glastonbury, and it miraculously flowered into a living thorn tree, the Glastonbury Thorn. Well that same story was repeated many times over across the land: many ancient trees were said to have been planted by early saints.

I'm actually doing a PhD now on the origins of Britain's natural holy places, which means I will be the world's biggest nerd on this topic at the end of it. But of all the things I've started to pick up in my research is the power of these trees to bind us and our religion to the landscape in many ways. I think in fact I could go further than that and say it isn't just an optional add-on to Christianity to have a beautiful environment in which to worship.

Remember the Bible reading we have just heard: Jesus talks about the beauty of the natural world. And he doesn't just mention it in passing, like a parable, to illustrate a point. He actually uses the imperative, commands us with his language to do something, which he very rarely does. And he says: "Behold the lilies of the valley..." Look at the beautiful plants around us, and think about what the nature of true beauty is.

So I've taken this Gospel literally in my studies to go and examine the natural landscapes that surround our Christian places of worship. And I won't go into any more detail on this other than to say that the yew tree is the dominant Christian tree found in churchyards around Britain. I'm a Reader at Mitcham Parish Church and we have in our own churchyard a rather young yew tree compared to yours, about 100 years old. But it was planted directly outside the front door of the church, so you see it when you go out. If you have been to the lovely church at Dunsfold, which is not too far from here, you will see there that the yew is directly outside the church door. Or rather the church door is directly in front of the yew, because there too like at Crowhurst they found the tree and then built their church around it.

There are many theories why yew trees abound in Britain, but I'll leave you with my own theory that I'm developing. The yew tree is the one of the most poisonous trees imaginable, just 100 grams of material from it has enough poison to kill a human being. Not that holy you might think but remember also that animals also instinctively know that the yew tree is special. One thing you won't see around a yew tree is a farm animal. It should also be noted that the power of your yew is not entirely malign in any case, since some important drugs used to treat cancer, Taxol and Taxotere, are in fact derived from the *taxus*, or yew tree.

And it's my belief that the earliest church settlements in Britain were actually set up as little enclaves of sanctuary around a hermit's or a missionary's little dwelling place. Time and again we hear how these early pioneers of Christianity protected animals from hunting in these little enclaves. Time and again we hear that they forbade any sort of agriculture in their little enclaves. And time and again we hear that the wild animals would flock to them in great number: deer, geese, swans, hares and ravens would cluster around the saints and would become part of their congregation.

So I think we are here today not just next to a sacred object or focus, an ancient tree, but standing within a sacred area, a space of sanctuary, even I would suggest the earliest form of nature reserve. So perhaps we in the Church of England should think of our parish as not just the people but also the land itself and all that live around us.

Our trees, our wildlife, our flowers, our lilies, and even, if St George will forgive me, our dragons are all part of the community we must care and pray for. Amen