

**Suggested Readings:** *Isaiah 52: 7 – 10; Psalm 67; Matthew 9: 35 – 38.*

In England by the early 630s bishoprics had been established in Canterbury, Rochester, London Dunwich, York and Lindisfarne, but this left the Anglo-Saxon areas southwest of these dioceses in pagan hands. So, in about AD 634, Pope Honorius sent the Italian monk Birinus to extend the Church in Britain. As was often done in those times, when the duties of a bishop were clearly seen to include evangelism, Birinus was consecrated before he set out.

Bede writes that he *had promised that he would sow the seed of our holy faith in the most inland and remote regions of the English where no other teacher had been before him...but when he had reached Britain...he found them completely heathen, and decided it would be better to begin to preach the word of God among them rather than seek more distant converts.*

He landed at the port of Hamwic (now part of Southampton), where he founded the first of a number of churches, and from there travelled round the area ruled by King Cynegils, with a royal site at the former Roman settlement of Dorchester-on-Thames. At this time the Christian Oswald (5<sup>th</sup> August) had recently become king in Northumbria, and Cynegils was seeking an alliance with him against the pagan kingdom of Mercia. In AD 639 Oswald was in Dorchester, and acted as godfather to Cynegils when Birinus baptized him and his family.

The two kings then gave Birinus the town of Dorchester as the centre of a diocese for the area which would become the kingdom of Wessex. The site of his cathedral is now occupied by the medieval parish church. A nearby village – Berinsfield – built with its parish church in the 1960s, preserves the memory of Birinus. He travelled widely, founding many churches, including one in Reading and another on Berin's Hill near Wallingford; but no buildings survive from his time.

Birinus died in 649 or 650, and was succeeded by Agilbert, a French-speaking bishop. But in 660 Cynegil's successor divided the Wessex diocese in two and set up a bishopric in Winchester, which would become the capital of Wessex, and later of England. Agilbert, annoyed by this act, done without consultation, left the area, took part in the Synod of Whitby, and eventually became Bishop of Paris. Dorchester ceased to be an episcopal see for Wessex, and in 690 the relics of Saint Birinus were translated to Winchester, where a cathedral chapel was dedicated to him.