For scholars of England before the Norman Conquest, the winter of 2018-19 will remain long in the memory because of the wonderful exhibition at the British Library: *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word and War*. Much media attention focused on the presence of the Codex Amiatinus, the huge pandect Bible copied in Bede’s monastery at Wearmouth-Jarrow and intended as a gift for the pope. This manuscript has not been in England since Bede’s abbot set sail with it for Rome in 716, nor has it previously been reunited with the loose leaves that are all that now survives of one of the other bibles made at the same time for Jarrow’s own use, which one could see in an adjacent case.

While manuscripts dominated the exhibition, a range of well-chosen artefacts helped in illustrating an overarching narrative that told how the pagan Germanic peoples of southeastern Britain were brought to the Christian faith in the sixth and seventh centuries and thereby acquired the technology of writing. It showed how over the following four hundred years the separate kingdoms of Wessex, East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria came to be united into one English realm that was conquered in the eleventh century successively by Danes and Normans. In that story, the midland realm of Mercia played a key role, especially during the eighth century; the curators gathered an impressive range of items to show the cultural significance of this region and its wide-ranging contacts with Ireland and with continental Europe. These books and other objects also illustrated, as did the exhibition as a whole, the profundity of the commitment of the early English to their new-found faith and the joy that scribes and artists who worked in different media took in celebrating their belief. Visitors admired multiple full-page images of evangelists, writing the words of their gospels with the assistance of angels, who reached out of heaven holding scrolls that conveyed the divine word; three remarkable psalters were displayed together in the final case, all with ink drawings interpreting each psalm.
phrase by phrase. We could puzzle out the wording on carefully-preserved documents recording gifts of land to individual churches, each made for the good of a donor’s soul, or wonder at a tiny portable sundial, inscribed with prayers for both craftsman and owner. So central was religion to the whole display, this could have – should have – been entitled *The Making of a Christian Nation*.

Among the Mercian manuscripts on show was a gospel book traditionally associated with a celebrated seventh-century Mercian saint, St Chad, the first bishop of Lichfield, whose feast fell yesterday, 2 March. Now incomplete, the book still has splendid full-page portraits of the evangelists Mark and Luke, and a carpet page showing the symbols of the four evangelists. In a nearby display case stood the so-called Lichfield angel (illustrated in your pew sheet). Although now broken, this piece of painted limestone once formed the left-hand end-panel of a relief-carved, house-shaped stone shrine that probably dates from the late eighth or early ninth century. This stone shrine seems to have been created to contain the earlier wooden coffin of St Chad, whose grave was the focus of a growing cult during the eighth century. It may date from the brief period in the 780s and 790s in which Lichfield became the seat of an archbishopric (dividing the southern province of Canterbury in two), when the community of the cathedral church will have wanted to promote their most famous saint. The figure is clearly an angel; one can still discern that his wings were delicately shaded in hues shading from red, through pink to white, while his robes were red and gold. Since he holds one hand up in greeting while the other clutches a flowering rod, we can identify him with the archangel Gabriel in the act of announcing the incarnation to the Virgin.

Who was St Chad, and how might his example still speak to us today? We know of Chad’s life and deeds thanks to Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, in which he played a significant role as both an exemplar of piety, devotion and apostolic mission, but also as a man of remarkable humility. One of four brothers, all of whom became priests, Chad was educated at Lindisfarne. In 664 he was invited to become bishop of Northumbria at the same time that the controversial cleric Wilfrid had also been offered the bishopric of York. While Wilfrid went to Gaul to seek consecration, because there was a shortage of canonically-ordained bishops in England, Chad, unwisely, accepted consecration from the hands of Wine of Dorchester together with two British bishops, whose ordination was not recognised by Rome. When a new, reforming archbishop Theodore started to set the English church in order in 669, he immediately objected to Chad’s uncanonical status, whereupon Chad responded, ‘If you believe that my consecration was irregular, I
gladly resign from the office; indeed, I never believed myself to be worthy of it.’ (HE IV.2). Having been deposed from York, Chad retired quietly to his monastery of Lastingham, but soon after Theodore re-consecrated him as bishop of the Mercians, among whom much missionary work remained to be done.

Chad preferred to carry out the work of spreading the good news of faith on foot, but archbishop Theodore ordered him to travel round his diocese on horseback, physically lifting the bishop onto a horse with his own hands. Chad established Lichfield as the site of his episcopal see, while building for himself a more retired dwelling place where he could read or pray privately with a few other monks, as often as he could free himself from his labours and the ministry of the word. As the time of his death approached, he received a visitation of angelic spirits from heaven, who came to summon him to the heavenly joys; a monk in the community witnessed the arrival and departure of that heavenly company and heard their sweet and joyful singing. Another later reported that he had seen the soul of Chad’s brother Cedd (former bishop of the East Saxons) descend from the sky with a host of angels and return to the heavenly kingdom, taking Chad’s soul with him. At St Peter’s church in Lichfield, Chad’s body soon became the focus of a cult because of the healing miracles performed there. Bede reported that the bishop was buried in a wooden coffin in the shape of a little house, with an aperture in its side through which the faithful could insert their hands and take some of the dust. When this was put in water and given to men or to cattle who were sick, their health was restored. Presumably it was this wooden coffin that was placed inside the more elaborate stone one that Gabriel and other angels adorned, when his shrine was made more elaborate during Lichfield’s brief period of eighth-century prominence.

In his life and deeds, Chad consistently testified to the love of God, the love that as we heard in our epistle, the Father has given us that we should be called children of God. To be God’s children is to be adopted by God; made in his image, we are in some senses already like him, sharing some of his own attributes. In an exemplary figure like Chad, that is easy to believe. But our epistle urges us to see the image of God not only in those whose sanctity we cannot doubt, but also in the wider body of Christ, in those among whom we find ourselves in worship and Christian fellowship. We should rejoice in that love now, enjoying our status as God’s children.

We also know, John wrote, that the future will bring another transformation; although we do not know exactly what that will be (for it has not yet been revealed), we do know that when God is revealed we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. We are already
transformed now by the fact of living in God’s love; in the future our hope is even
greater. In Chad’s case, something of that transformation had already become manifest
before his death, as his reported angelic visitation before he died and the means by which
he was carried up to heaven was meant to support. We rightly remember his missionary
work and his example of humility and purity in commemorating his feast on the
anniversary of his death each year. Yet even as we celebrate his extraordinariness (to
which his angelic visitors attested), so we must also hold onto the more important truth
in John’s epistle. John’s discussion of the future shows us that all Christians in all times
and places will share a common future. We should all share the conviction that death is
not the end of life either with our fellow Christians, or with God. In a way that we
cannot yet understand, or even glimpse in the present, we will belong to one another, as
well as to Christ in death.

As our epistle reminded us, the exact details of the life that we will experience beyond
death remains unknown. But John expressed the utter conviction that God will be shown
to be powerful even over death itself. We know that whatever the future may hold, our
connection with Christ and with God endures. Remembering individual saints is a vital
way for us to remind ourselves of that fundamental truth, and that the body of Christ
encompasses not just those of us who now make up the Church, but the greater body of
past believers, a communion of saints who together create a connection transcending the
limits of time and space. It matters that we remember the figures of our common past
who did extraordinary things for Christ, whose footsteps we struggle to follow: figures
like Chad, or David, patron saint of Wales whose feast we kept last Friday. But as well as
those saints whom we have never met, we often find ourselves in fellowship with others
who did touch our own lives, people whose extraordinary acts of personal generosity to
us in time of need, whose teaching or prayerful example helped to lift us out of our
worldly preoccupations and find a more fruitful perspective on spiritual truths. God’s
power and love hold believers together in past, present and future; his grace will give us
all a place with him in heaven where we may rejoice with Our Lady, Frideswide, Chad
and all the saints in glory.