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“A Barbarous, Fierce and Pagan Nation”

St. Augustine of Canterbury and the British Mission

We think of early Christian missionaries as being men and women who went to their destinies resolute and unwavering. Not often do hagiographers show us the prelude to these great adventures of the Spirit, and how our all-too-human nature sometimes needs the steely resolve of a higher command to face the unknown.

THE 5TH AND 6TH CENTURY Saxon invasions that followed the retreat of the Roman army drove British Christianity into isolation and hiding. Many areas slipped back into paganism, while the vast unmissionized north continued to slumber, untouched by the early Christian centuries of the Roman occupation. During his late 6th century reign as Pope of Rome, St. Gregory the Great (later known as the “Enlightener of Britain”) was inspired to reclaim the island for Christ and sent forty Italian monks led by St. Augustine to make a first attempt. As they journeyed through France, the monks were terrified by reports of the cruel barbarity of the pagan Saxons who had conquered England, and dark prophecies of their own imminent death.

Venerable Bede relates:

In the year of our Lord 582, Maurice, fifty-fourth in succession from Augustus, became Emperor, and ruled for twenty-one years. In the tenth year of his reign, Gregory, an eminent scholar and administrator, was elected pontiff of the apostolic Roman see.... In the fourteenth year of the Emperor...Gregory was inspired by God to send his servant Augustine with several other God-fearing monks to preach the word of God to the English nation. Having undertaken this task in obedience to the Pope’s command and progressed a short distance on their journey, they became afraid, and began to consider returning home. For they were appalled at the idea of going to a barbarous, fierce and pagan nation, of whose very language they were ignorant. They unanimously agreed that this was the safest course, and sent back Augustine - who was to be consecrated bishop in the event of their being received by the English – so that he might humbly request the holy Gregory to recall them from so dangerous, arduous, and uncertain a journey...

Pope Gregory responded to their plea, sending back Augustine with the words:

My very dear sons, it is better never to undertake any high enterprise than to abandon it when once begun. So with the help

of God you must carry out this holy task which you have begun. Do not be deterred by the troubles of the journey or by what men say. Be constant and zealous in carrying out this enterprise which, under God’s guidance, you have undertaken: and be assured that the greater the labour, the greater will be the glory of your eternal reward... May God protect you with His grace, and grant me to see the result of your labours in our heavenly home. And although my office prevents me from working at your side, yet because I long to do so, I hope to share in your joyful reward. God keep you safe, my dearest sons...

Their terror and reluctance to proceed was extreme—according to Venerable Bede it took them another year to cross France and step foot on British soil.

When they arrived, however, they found themselves not only still alive, but welcomed beyond all expectation by King Ethelbert, the ruler of Kent and Bretwalda, the acknowledged “Chief of Chiefs,” who had married Bertha, the Christian daughter of the King of the Franks in Paris. The King met them upon their arrival and asked Augustine of his intentions. Augustine spoke at length of the Christian message and their desire to spread the Gospel. Ethelbert replied:

Your words and promises are very fair, but as they are new to us and of uncertain import, I cannot approve of them so far as to forsake that which I have so long followed with the whole English nation. But because you are come from afar unto my kingdom, and as I conceive that you are desirous to impart to me those things which you believe to be true and most beneficial, we will not molest you, but give you favorable entertainment, and take care to supply you with your necessary sustenance. Nor do we forbid you to preach and gain as many as you can to your religion.

Venerable Bede adds, “Nobler and more royal welcome to a messenger from heaven than those words can scarcely be shown in the history of Christian origins. It is good to look back to the spiritual ancestors of our church, and feel that *noblesse oblige*.”

A year later the King was baptized at Whitsuntide, and the next Christmas, ten thousand of his people were baptized in the river Medway, where it flowed into the Thames. St. Augustine performed many miracles, and died in May 605, two months after St. Gregory. ☩