

Reflection Friday 6th Week Easter St Augustine of Canterbury 2022

Saint Augustine of Canterbury (- 605?) Christianity in Britain started early, but was largely submerged by the pagan Anglo-Saxon invasions of the 5th and 6th centuries, remaining alive only in the far west, which remained British being too remote and inaccessible for invaders to attack. It is said Pope Gregory the Great saw fair-haired Anglo-Saxon slaves for sale in a market in Rome. Asking where they were from, he was told, *non Angli, sed angeli* – “not Angles, but angels,” and determined to secure their evangelisation. Gregory organised 30 monks to travel to south-east England and spread the Gospel there. Augustine, prior of St Andrew monastery in Rome, was chosen to lead them. Landing in 597, they were welcomed by Ethelbert, king of Kent, who became a Christian along with many subjects. A second wave of missionaries arrived in 601. Augustine went to Arles, in France, and was consecrated archbishop of the English, before returning to Canterbury to set up his see. The mission prospered, and he founded two more sees, London and Rochester in Kent.

The evangelisation of the country, with the close agreement of Pope Gregory, took care to respect existing traditions. Pagan temples and holy places were not destroyed, but converted to Christian use; and pagan feasts were to be superseded by Christian ones. This was consistent with the pattern of evangelisation throughout the first millennium, which saw Christianity as a fulfilment of what went before, rather than a contradiction of it. Even in Rome itself, temples of Juno had a tendency to become churches dedicated to Our Lady.

In far west Britain, where British bishops had survived pagan invasions – or fled to escape them – Augustine was less successful in establishing his authority. The traditions of the Celtic Church were different from the Roman ones, and bishops who had guided their people for generations were not about to submit to missionaries from overseas. It took several generations for the whole of Great Britain to become Christian and for the English and British liturgical traditions to be reconciled. Augustine died at Canterbury on 26th May 604 or 605.