

Dear Friends,

There is a well-known story of Pope Gregory the Great seeing some British slaves on sale in the market in Rome. He was impressed by their fair hair, a rare sight in Italy, and asked who they were. 'Angli,' he was told – people from Anglia. 'Non Angli, sed angeli,' he replied – not Anglians, but angels.

Today we might wonder how a Pope could apparently accept the practice of slavery without comment, but it took many centuries before this feature of the ancient world came to be questioned, even though we might think it blatantly contradicts the Christian gospel. St. Paul said that in Christ there is no distinction between male and female, Greek and Jew, slave and freeman, but it took a long time before the implications of this teaching for our social policy came to be realised. At any rate it was that experience of seeing British slaves which made Pope Gregory resolve to send missionaries to their distant land. In fact, the Christian religion had already been present here from the days of the Roman empire, but when the military withdrew and Britain was invaded by raiders from northern Europe, the Romano-British Christians retreated westwards to the Celtic areas of western Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Ireland, leaving south-east England, the land of the Angli, easy prey to Vikings, Danes and other invaders.

Gregory's mission to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons was sent in 596 A.D., led by Augustine, who became the first Archbishop of Canterbury. Among his company was an Italian called Mellitus, who became the first Saxon bishop of London in 604 and later succeeded as archbishop. (His feast day was yesterday, 24 March, but following St. George's Day it probably receives little attention). Mellitus received a celebrated letter from Pope Gregory, recorded by the Venerable Bede, which suggests that the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons be conducted gradually, respecting and integrating pagan rituals and customs.

There is an important principle at work here. A good teacher always knows that you should take those to be taught where they are and work from there, not where you think they are or ought to be. Missionaries sometimes talk of "taking" God to benighted heathens who know nothing of him, but of course God is already present everywhere, in all places and all times. His presence may not be recognised, but is no less real for that, and there may well be signs of his presence that can be built on and Christianised. The process is known now as *inculturation*: not watering down Christian beliefs, but presenting them in a way that can be adapted to existing cultures, and so transforming those cultures that they become authentically Christian. We can see this happening throughout our Christian history: many churches in this country, for instance, were built on ancient religious sites.

On this 4th Sunday of Easter we have readings about Christ as the Good Shepherd, and I feel sure that a good shepherd is one who does not impose on his sheep, but cares for them, guides them and enables them to grow and develop into what they are capable of being, working with their nature, not against it.

I often think of the famous 18th century gardener, Capability Brown. He believed that a garden should be true to nature, not distort it. Instead of rigidly square flower-beds and trees clipped into bizarre shapes, his landscapes feature broad sweeping lawns, clumps of tree and bushes dotted here and there, often a winding lake which looks like a river flowing into the distance. Examples of his work are found all over this country, often with a stately home at the centre. He designed the gardens of nearby Syon Park and had a hand in the lay-out of Richmond Park and Kew Gardens.

Brown's real name was Lancelot, but he is best known by his nickname, which is said to have come about in this way. When being engaged to design a new landscape park, he would look at the ground and say, 'Ah yes, this has capabilities!' I like to think that God looks at us, weighs us up and says, 'Ah yes, this person, this child of mine, has capabilities. He/she is capable of growing into the person I made my children to be: human beings who have the love of God at their heart and can become more truly and fully people who know that love and live their lives out of that love.' So God works with the nature he has given us and enables us to fulfil our potential. In order to do that we need the love and care of the Good Shepherd, and that is what God makes available to us in his son.

An aspect of our God-given nature that has gone badly awry is the divisiveness and separation, the alienation of people from each other because of their race, colour, religion, whatever we use to distinguish and categorise people in this way or that. But in fact, since all people are loved by God and indwelt by his love, at the heart of things we are one, united and inseparable. This is the deepest truth about all human beings: that we are all one in God; and so Jesus says in the Gospel reading for this Sunday,

*There are other sheep I have that are not of this fold,
and these I have to lead as well.
They too will listen to my voice,
and there will be only one flock and one shepherd.*

The churches too are divided. By our ecumenical endeavours we have come a long way in overcoming our divisions, but there is still much to be done, and the unity of the churches and religions is only one step towards the ultimate unity of all people in God.

The second reading this Sunday expresses well our human destiny:

*My dear people, we are already the children of God,
but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed;
all we know is that when it is revealed we shall be like him,
because we shall seem as he really is.*

Wishing you every blessing in this Easter season, Fr. Robin

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