

(h) SAINT AUGUSTINE OF CANTERBURY

(MAY 27TH, 2020)

Readings for Today: [Acts 20: 28 – 38] 1 Thessalonians: 2 – 8; Psalm 96(95); Luke 10: 1 – 9.

Augustine was the prior of the monastery of Saint Andrew in Rome, founded by Gregory (Saint Gregory the Great, after whom the church is now named) on his family estate. Gregory – moved, so his legend tells, by the sight of fair-haired English slaves for sale – had wished to be a missionary to the Anglo-Saxons, but this became impossible when in AD 590 he was elected as Pope. So, in his place, he sent Augustine with a group of thirty monks.

After a hesitant start they arrived at Ebbsfleet in AD 597 and journeyed to Canterbury, the capital of the Kingdom of Kent, whose king, Ethelbert, was married to a Christian princess from France. He agreed to meet them – in the open air, for fear of magic – and, after hearing them, allowed them to preach Jesus and to baptize any of his subjects who wished to become Christians. He gave them the use of a Roman church dedicated to Saint Martin, still in use outside the city walls. By 601 Ethelbert himself had been baptized, and, as he was the nominal overlord of the kingdoms south of the Humber, he was able to support Augustine's mission in that part of England.

In the ten years before his death Augustine established his primatial see in Canterbury, and appointed two of his companions, Justus and Mellitus, to bishoprics in Rochester and London. Pope Gregory's plan, based on the records of the Roman settlement in Britain, for archbishoprics in London and York, was never fulfilled. Instead Canterbury Cathedral, dedicated, like the Papal Cathedral in Rome, to Christ the Saviour, remains to this day the principal see in England.

Augustine's mission had less success in the west of Britain where bishops following the Celtic, or Irish, pattern of Church life, were unwilling to co-operate with him, while the conversion of England north of the Humber was led by Irish Missionaries from Iona.

Augustine died on 26th May in or near AD 605. He was buried in the nave of the abbey he had founded (later rebuilt and called by his name until it was destroyed under Henry VIII). The site of his tomb can still be seen. Another relic is the Gospel Book, almost certainly brought by Augustine from Rome, and still used at the installation of archbishops of Canterbury.

Pray for the continuing work of the conversion of England to Christ, and for reconciliation between the see of Saint Augustine in Canterbury and the see of Saint Gregory in Rome.