

Readings for Today: *1 Thessalonians 2: 2 – 8; Psalm 95 (96); Matthew 16: 13 – 19.*

Gregory – one of only three popes given the title ‘The Great’ – was born into a Roman patrician family about AD 540. After a thorough education, including the Law, he entered the Roman ‘civil service’. When his father died in 573, he handed the extensive family properties to the Church and founded six monasteries in Sicily and S. Andrew’s in his own home in Rome (south of the Colosseum). The next year he entered S. Andrew’s as a monk. But in 578 the Pope called him out of the monastery to become one of the seven deacons of Rome, who were responsible for administration. The following year he was sent as the papal representative to the imperial court in Constantinople. In 585 he returned to Rome and became abbot of S. Andrew’s, where he hoped to spend the rest of his life. But in 560, the pope died from a plague which was rife in the city and Gregory was unanimously elected as his successor. He tried unsuccessfully to escape this call and was consecrated as Bishop of Rome on 3rd September.

For the next thirteen years he worked incessantly, both for the Church and for the city – and indeed for society beyond the city – and left important writings for the benefit of later ages.

But for the English his most memorable achievement was to initiate the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons from the South (as Oswald and Aidan were to do from in the North). The traditional story told by Bede is well known: Gregory had seen some fair-haired boys for sale as slaves and, on being told that they were pagans, replied ‘how sad that such bright-faced folk are still in the grasp of the author of darkness, and that such graceful features conceal minds void of God’s grace.’

From that moment he longed to go to their homeland to preach the Christian Gospel. Being consecrated as Pope made that impossible for him, so he sent Augustine, provost of his monastery of S. Andrew, and a group of monks – no others being willing to undertake the long and dangerous journey to “a barbarous, fierce and pagan nation’ – to do so in his place.

So it is entirely appropriate that we should acclaim him as ‘The Apostle of the English’. Without his determined support of Augustine the conversion of the southern English would have been much delayed,

His feast is kept today because the anniversary of his death (12th March) always falls in Lent.