

Module 113: Gregory

The History of the English Church and People by Bede. Translated by A.M. Sellar, Abridged and modernized by Stephen Tomkins. Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

“This barbarous, fierce and unbelieving nation.”

Module Introduction

Gregory I (540-604) was the first monk to become pope. He was born into the ruling class, but had given away everything he owned to become a monk. During his impressive papacy, he devoted himself to reforming the church and monasteries and to helping Italians who were suffering from famine, plague, and invasions.

Another of his lasting achievements was the conversion of Southern England. This area of Britain had been conquered by pagan Angles and Saxons, 'the English'. But when King Ethelbert of Kent married a Christian princess, it seems Gregory saw an opening, and sent his prior Augustine (not to be confused with Augustine of Hippo, whom we have already met) to evangelize them. One story, that is not included in our excerpt from Bede, says that Gregory was inspired by the sight of some young English slaves whom he saw in Rome. Amazed by their fair hair, he asked who they were, and being told they were Angles, replied "Not Angles, but angels."

The following account tells the story of Augustine's mission to England. It is taken from *The History of the English Church and People*, written by the father of English history, Bede, a monk who was born about 80 years after the events he describes.

23. The holy Pope Gregory sends Augustine with other monks, to preach to the English, and encourage them by a letter of exhortation, to persevere in their work.

In 582 AD, Emperor Maurice ascended the throne, and reigned for twenty one years. In the tenth year of his reign,

Gregory, an eminent scholar and administrator, was promoted to the Apostolic see of Rome, and oversaw it for thirteen years, six months and ten days. He was inspired by God, in 596 - about 150 years after the English first came to Britain - to send the servant of God Augustine with other monks who feared the Lord, to preach the word of God to the English nation. They set off obediently, but were soon seized with terror, and wanted to return home instead of going to this barbarous, fierce and unbelieving nation where they did not even know the language. They agreed that it was safer to return, so Augustine - who was appointed to be bishop if they were accepted by the English - went back humbly to implore the blessed Gregory to let them off this dangerous, hard and uncertain journey. The Pope responded by sending them a letter urging them on to the work of preaching God's word, and to rely on God's help. This is what he said: "From Gregory, the servant of the servants of God, to the servants of our Lord. "Since it is better not to begin a good work than to think of giving it up once you have started, you, my beloved sons, ought diligently to complete the good work, which, by the help of the Lord, you have undertaken. So do not let the toil of the journey or the tongues of men, discourage you, but with all earnestness and by God's guidance fulfill what you have started, knowing that great labor is followed by the greater glory of an eternal reward...."

25. Augustine preaches in the Isle of Thanet to the King of Kent.

Strengthened by this encouragement from the blessed Father Gregory, Augustine returned to the work of the Word of God, with the servants of Christ who were with him, and arrived in Britain. The powerful Ethelbert was then king of Kent. He had extended his dominions as far as the great river Humber which divided the Southern Saxons from the Northern. On the east of Kent is the large Isle of Thanet containing 600 families, and this is where Augustine and his 40 companions landed. They had obtained Frankish

interpreters by order of the blessed Pope Gregory, and told Ethelbert that had come from Rome with a joyful message which assured those that listened to it everlasting joys in heaven and a kingdom that would never end with the living and true God. Hearing this, the King gave orders that they should stay on the island and be given all they needed, while he considered what to do with them. He had heard of the Christian religion before, having a Christian wife from the royal family of the Franks called Bertha.

It had been a condition of the marriage that he allow her to keep the ways of her religion undisturbed, with the Bishop Liudhard as her chaplain. A few days later, the King came into the island and sitting in the open air, he ordered Augustine and his companions to come and talk with him. He had taken the precaution of staying outside because of an ancient superstition that if they were magicians they would find it easier to get the better of him indoors. But they came with divine, not magic power, carrying a silver cross for their banner, and the image of our Lord and Savior painted on a board. Chanting litanies, they offered up their prayers to the Lord for eternal salvation - both their own and of those to whom they had come. In obedience to the King's command, they sat down and preached to him and his attendants the word of life. The King answered, "Your words and promises are fair, but they are new to us, and strange. I cannot accept them if it means abandoning the ancient religion of the whole English nation. But since you have come a long way and are strangers in my kingdom, apparently wishing to impart to us what you believe to be true and beneficial, we do not want to harm you. We will be hospitable and make sure you have every necessity. You may preach and convert as many people as you can." The King gave them accommodation in the city of Canterbury, the capital of all his dominions, and did all he had said. We are told that as they approached the city, with the holy cross and the image of our sovereign Lord and King, Jesus Christ, they sang this litany: "We beseech thee, O Lord, for Thy

great mercy, that Thy wrath and anger be turned away from this city, and from Thy holy house, for we have sinned. Hallelujah."

26. Augustine follows the doctrine and manner of life of the early church, and settles his episcopal see in the royal city.

Once in the house assigned to them, they began to follow the apostolic way of life of the early church. They prayed and fasted constantly, and preached the Word of life to as many as they could. They despised all worldly things and received nothing from those they taught except the food they needed. They practiced everything they preached, and were prepared to suffer and even die for it. Some people, impressed by their blameless simplicity of life, and the sweetness of their heavenly doctrine, believed and were baptized. There was an old church on the east side of the city dating back to the Roman occupation, dedicated to St. Martin, where the Queen, who as I said was a Christian, used to pray. This is where they met to sing the Psalms, pray, celebrate Mass, preach and baptize - although when the King was converted to the faith, they were able to preach everywhere and build or repair other churches.

Eventually the King believed and was baptized, attracted like others by the pure life of these holy men and their gracious promises which they confirmed by many miracles. More people every day flocked to hear the Word and have fellowship in the unity of Christ's Holy Church, forsaking their pagan rites. It is said that, while he rejoiced at their conversion and their faith, the King never forced anyone to embrace Christianity, - he just showed more favor to the believers, as to his fellow citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven. For he had learned from those who had instructed him and guided him to salvation, that the service of Christ ought to be voluntary, not by compulsion. Before long he gave these teachers a permanent residence suitable to their status in Canterbury.

27. Augustine is made a bishop, tells Pope Gregory what has happened in Britain, and has his questions answered.

In the meantime, Augustine, the man of God, went to Arles [in Gaul] and as instructed by the holy Father Gregory was ordained Archbishop of the English by Aetherius, Archbishop of that city. Returning to Britain, he sent men to Rome to tell Pope Gregory that the English nation had received the faith of Christ, and that he was himself made their bishop. At the same time, he asked Gregory to answer some urgent questions. He soon received fitting answers to his questions, which I have reproduced here:

1. How should bishops relate to their clergy? How should the offerings of the faithful at the altar be apportioned? And how should the bishop act in Church?

Gregory answers: Holy Scripture, which you know well, explains this - particularly the Blessed Paul's letters to Timothy. He tells him how he should act in the house of God, and it is the custom of the Apostolic See to apply these rules to bishops. All the money they are given should be divided in four: one for the bishop and his household, for hospitality to guests; another for the clergy; a third for the poor; and the fourth for the repair of churches. But you, my brother, have been instructed in monastic rules, so you must not live apart from your clergy in the Church of the English. You must live like our fathers in the primitive Church, none of whom considered his possessions his own, but shared all things common.

Any clerics who are not monks and who are not willing to stay celibate, should take wives, and receive their income from outside the community, because it is written that the same forefathers I mentioned distributed goods to any who were in need. Watch over their pay and make sure they are provided for. They should be kept under church rules, live

orderly lives, oversee the singing of psalms, and, by the help of God, preserve their hearts and tongues and bodies from all that is unlawful. As for those who live as a community, there is no need to say anything about assigning portions, being hospitable and showing mercy, since whatever they have left over is to be used for religious works, according to the teaching of him who is the Lord and Master of all: "Give charitably from what you have, and all things will be clean to you."

2. Since the faith is one and the same, why are there different customs in different Churches? Why do the holy Roman Church and the Church of Gaul celebrate Mass in different ways?

Gregory answers: You know the customs of the Roman Church in which you remember that you were brought up, my brother. But if you have found anything which may be more acceptable to Almighty God, whether it is in the Roman church or in Gaul, or anywhere else, what I want you to do is to make a careful selection from them, and bring them together in the religion that you teach to the English Church which is still new in the faith. For things are not to be loved for the sake of places, but places for the sake of good things. So, pick from every Church those things that are pious and right, and when you have made them up into one package, let the English grow accustomed to it.

3. What punishment must be inflicted on someone who steals from a church?

Gregory answers: The correction should depend on the condition of the thief. Some commit theft despite what they already have, while others transgress because of poverty. Some therefore should be fined, others beaten, some more severely and some more mildly. But when the severity is greater, it should be motivated by love, not anger, because it is done for the sake of him who is corrected, so that he may not be given over to the fires of Hell.

Discussion Starters:

1. Why was this mission to England so frightening to Augustine et al.? How did Gregory persuade them to continue?
2. What influence do you think Queen Bertha had on the success of Augustine's mission?
3. How would you sum up the gospel message to an ancient pagan tribe? How does your version compare with what Augustine's men told Ethelbert, according to Bede?
4. How did the missionaries live in Canterbury? Why do you think this seems have had a positive effect on their success?
5. Do you think the fact that the Roman Empire they had conquered had been Christian made any difference to the ease or difficulty with which the tribes accepted Christianity?
6. What rules does Gregory give Augustine for clerics? Do you think they are good rules?
7. What is Gregory's attitude to churches with different ways of doing things? Do you think Cyprian would have agreed with this? Is Gregory's attitude right?
8. Do you think Augustine's mission is different or similar to Christian missions today? How does the situation that those missionaries faced compare with ours? Is there anything to be learned from their approach?

Bible verses

Matthew 28:16-20

Joshua 1:1-9

Luke 10:1-12

Isaiah 56:1-8