31ST AUGUST AIDAN

The stories of AIDAN and BIRINUS [4th of September] both occur near the beginning of book 3 of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History and are linked by King Oswald of NORTHUMBRIA who During his banishment in Scotland, was converted and baptized, and on his release, sent back to Scotland asking for a bishop who would assist him in converting his subjects.

The account of Aidans’ life in Bede begins at book 3 ch5. He recounts that the first man the Scottish Council sent in response to Oswald’s request was a rather harsh one, whom nobody wanted to hear very much, so that he returned rather dispirited and said that the people were too stubborn to receive the Word. It was Aidan who suggested that maybe his colleague had not followed Paul’s advice to offer the things that are easiest to take in first, and that, perhaps he’d been preaching the more difficult matter too early. The council listened carefully to Aidan and realized that he was the man for the job; consecrated him bishop and sent him on his way to Oswald, who assigned him the island of Lindisfarne as a See at his own request.

Bede writes of the beauty of hearing the king interpret Aidan’s preaching to his earls and thanes, because Aidan himself, an Irishman, was not fluent in English, whereas Oswald had learnt Scottish during his long exile there. At this time there seems to be little distinction among many writers between the Scottish and Irish languages.

Bede’s hagiography of Aidan emphasizes his humility and charity; that he went everywhere on foot so that he could address people on level terms instead of from horseback; that he gave everything he was given by rich and powerful people directly to the needy, and that when he was entertained at the royal table, he ate very little, and left as soon as it was discretely polite. The portrait Bede paints of Aidan is one that reflects the same values as we find later this week in the personality of Pope Gregory the Great: discretion, gentleness, humility and charity are his principal virtues, and Bede makes it clear that Aidan didn’t preach anything he didn’t practice.

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1ST SEPTEMBER GILES

GILES was a hermit who died around 710. He set up a monastery in the place in Provence named after him, which became one of the stopovers for pilgrims on the way to both Compostela and the Holy land. Giles took care of the sick and wounded, of which there would have been plenty, the pilgrim’s way being as rough as it was. He took particular care of lepers, of whom there was great fear of contagion; to the extent that they were not admitted into towns, and had to congregate on the outskirts, where special churches were erected to serve their needs. Many of these churches are named after St Giles.

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2ND SEPTEMBER THE MARTYRS OF PAPUA NEW GUINNEA

The account of THE MARTYRS OF PAPUA NEW GUINNEA mentions two missionaries who were killed, presumably by natives, in 1901, but goes on to recount, in some detail, the fates of 333 missionaries and their staff – from various countries and denominations, together with two natives, who were killed by the Japanese invaders in 1942.

In anticipation of the imminent arrival of the Japanese, Bishop Philip Strong made a broadcast to his staff, exhorting them to stay and warning that it would be impossible to face the people whom they were in New Guinea to serve were they to up sticks and leave. This is part of his broadcast:

We could never hold up our faces again, if, for our own safety, we all forsook him and fled when the shadows of the passion began to gather around him in his spiritual body, the church in Papua. Our life in the future would be burdened with shame and we could not come back here and face our people again: and we would be conscious always of rejected opportunity. The history of the church tells us that missionaries do not think of themselves in the hour of danger, and crisis, but of the master who called them to give their all, and of the people they have been trusted to serve and love to the utmost. …

The message goes on to say that this is nonetheless true today than it was when Jesus gave it to his disciples. Every man and woman stayed at their posts, and were murdered horribly by the Japanese soldiers.

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3RD SEPTEMBER GREGORY THE GREAT

Gregory was by far the greatest Pope of the early middle-ages and was named the fourth early doctor of the church together with Leo, Augustine and Jerome.

Gregory was probably born in 540, attained to the papacy in 590 and died in 614. He came from a noble family and underwent a classic Roman education. By 573 he had become Prefect of Rome; equivalent to both mayor and chief magistrate; but in that year his father died, and Gregory took an entirely new direction, converting his family palace into a monastery which he entered as a simple brother. Such was the extent of the family estate he inherited that he was able to build six more monasteries on it, before, three years later, he was called back into the world as a’ Regionarius’, a deacon taking charge of one of Rome’s seven ecclesiastical areas to look after general administration and the poor. This would have remembered: at his death the Roman populace insisted on his immediate canonization.

In 580 Gregory was sent as a papal nuncio to persuade the emperor to send an army to help drive the Lombards out of Italy. Although, like Augustine, he never took to Greeks or their language Gregory managed to gain the confidence of two successive emperors, and with first-hand knowledge of the Byzantine court and its ways, in 585 he was finally able to return to Italy and his monastery. At the death of Pope Pelagius, however, Gregory was the obvious candidate to succeed him which he did though with the utmost reluctance; the first monk ever to be elected Pope. He is said to have tried to run away – and with very good reason.

For more than a century Rome, and Italy itself had been in dire straits: he wrote to John, the Patriarch of Constantinople, that he had ‘inherited an old ship, that was forever becoming more water-logged, its rotten timbers warning of shipwreck, and the ‘abominable Lombards’ virtually at the gates of Rome:

‘How can I consider the needs of my brethren ensuring that the city is protected from the swords of the enemy, and that the people are not destroyed by a sudden attack, and yet, at the same time, deliver the word of exhortation, fully and effectively for the salvation of souls

He very soon discovered that his primary duties as Pope were not dissimilar to those he had handled so successfully as prefect of Rome, and all this coloured his theology.

Rome was filled with three thousand nuns fleeing from the Lombards, and one of Gregory’s first priorities was to import as much grain as he could from Sicily and to release money from church funds to alleviate their plight.

Romanus, the Exarch of Ravenna, [appointed to represent the pretensions of Constantinople to be ruling the Roman empire] was insanely jealous of the powers of the papacy and wouldn’t do a thing to help Gregory: In consequence Gregory’s administrative experience came in useful immediately, because he was now effectively acting as both civil and military governor of most of central Italy, moving troops supervising the movement of goods, as well as paying wages, often from church funds; in charge of defending both Rome and Naples against separate Lombard dukes who he had no real alternative to paying off with more church funds; not to mention that the officials of the Exarch weren’t averse to taking the odd bribe either. In 598 an uneasy peace was finally negotiated with the Lombards.

By the time Gregory ascended the throne the church had become the biggest landowner in Western Europe, with some estates in North Africa as well. Until now nobody had even attempted to take all this property in hand for administration, but Gregory divided this patrimony of Peter into 15 administrative areas to be run by 15 rectors whom he appointed himself, and who were directly responsible to him for the collection of rents, sale and transport of all goods, rendering exact accounts and looking after all the charitable institutions and the maintenance of all churches and monasteries.

This re-organisation required entire ranks of sub-deacons, notaries, treasurers, and senior executive officers known as’ Defensores’, who worked principally as his agents, making sure his reforms were being carried out to the best of their ability. He increased the number of deacons several-fold. In addition to this enormous civil service, Gregory also needed to supervise some hundreds of bishops, not all of whom were, by any means, keen on his reforms. It was primarily in an attempt to standardize the quality and work of these bishops as preachers that Gregory wrote and disseminated his ‘Book of Pastoral Rule.’

This new chancery was also responsible for foreign relations, and in particular those with the Byzantine Empire which, however, rapidly deteriorated, leaving Gregory to look towards Visigothic Spain and Frankish Gaul, all nominally Christian, but not Catholic.

Around 600 the king of Spain announced his conversion from Arianism followed in turn by his nobles and bishops; the rank and file, being Roman citizens, were already Catholic. Frankish Gaul extended over modern France, the Benelux, Germany and Switzerland, but although Clovis – the name from which Louis is derived – was nominally baptized in 493, his lands were in chaos.

Gregory had described Britain as the end of the universe, but was keen to have the pagan rulers evangelized, and the Celtic Christians under Catholic supervision. It was in 595 that he wrote to his Rector of Gaul asking for young Anglo-Saxon boys to be trained up as monks, presumably to act as interpreters. The famous pun attributed to him that fair-haired Anglo-Saxon slave boys looked more like ‘angels’ is somebody’s ‘bon mot.’

Gregory entertained 12 poor people at table every day of his pontificate and regarded the wealth of the church as being for their benefit. John Julius Norwich, in his history of the Popes, asserts that by consolidating the church’s estates as efficiently as he did, he created the basis for the future papal states, and established the foundations of papal secular power that lasted another thirteen centuries. For all this, Gregory never coveted power, and wished always to remain ‘Servant of the servants of God’ and insisted that humility was at the base of all Christian conduct. Many of his bishops hated him because he so far forgot himself as to draw money from the sale of crops on church lands in order to feed the poor, instead of passing it into their hands.

Of his two famous books, his hagiography of Benedict is just that, and has very little to do with reality, besides which the Lombards had already destroyed his original monastic site at Monte Casino. The value and influence of the book lies rather in Gregory’s name having, by its own prestige, promoted the Benedictine order to the precedence it occupied for subsequent centuries.

‘The Book of the Pastoral Rule’, on the other hand, is of very great historical importance not so much nowadays as any sort of training manual, but because it attempted to set standards for its time, for the calling and quality of bishops and their duties, and a good deal of homiletic as to how some 40 pairings of people in contrasted conditions should be ‘differently admonished.’ There may well be some flashes of insight in these 40 chapters, but the modern reader will undoubtedly find them more efficiently elsewhere, besides which Gregory’s target audience is his bishops, and its preoccupation is affective preaching rather than any effort to listen or respond to needs. The importance of the book is that it was copied and circulated throughout the whole of the Carolingian empire, and that Alfred the great translated it himself and distributed copies all round his realm.

Prof Colt Anderson asserts that if the church had lived up to Gregory’s precepts and pastoral theology a good deal of its problems would never have arisen. Gregory would not tolerate conversion by violent means; nor would he permit torture in the cause of doctrinal orthodoxy. He maintained that it is the duty of subordinates to correct their superiors with compassion though he maintained the importance of discipline and insisted that once an ordained person had committed a serious sin, he should never be re-instated, lest the faithful be scandalized.

Gregory’s life and work are a testimony to the truth that there is a spirituality in good administration. It was fortunate that they set standards that the church found difficult, on the whole, to live up to for subsequent centuries, during which the papacy suffered some of its very worst popes, until the middle of the 11th century when a succession of energetic and determined popes brought about some more administrative improvement.

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4TH SEPTEMBER BIRINUS

Bede’s account of BIRINUS is that he came from Rome, determined to be a missionary, and got authorization from Pope Honorius to evangelise the most barbarous people he could find. When he arrived at Wessex he was so shocked by the heathen ways of those he encountered that he realized he needed to go no further. In time he converted the king, and his subjects followed on as was usual in those days. Bede tells us that when the king emerged from the font Oswald of Northumbria greeted him; adopted him as godson and offered his own daughter to the king in marriage. Birinus is buried in Winchester cathedral.

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