WHEN THE SAINTS…..

31ST of AUGUST AIDAN

1ST of SEPTEMBER GILES

2ND of SEPTEMBER THE MARTYRS OF PAPUA NEW GUINNEA

3RD of SEPTEMBER GREGORY THE GREAT

4TH of SEPTEMBER BIRINUS

6TH of SEPTEMBER ALLEN GARDINER

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

Bede recounts that the first man the council sent 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 Scots and Irish.

There is a hagiography of Aidan at ch5 of book 3, that 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 for him to do so. 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.

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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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 stop-overs 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 for St Giles.

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The account of THE MARTYRS OF PAPUA NEWGUINNEA 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.

The article goes on to suggest that the seeds of martyrdom have borne fruit in the various Christian endeavours that exist today in New Guinea.

We have already encountered GREGORY the GREAT as the author of the hagiography of Benedict, who was something of a role model for him, and any Anglican who has read Bede will know the legend of how he saw some fair-haired, blue-eyed boys in the Roman slave market and, on being told that they were Angles, he remarked that they must be angels, and therefore should not forgo the opportunity of sharing their blessings: so far so wrong; he knew of Britain some time previously as we shall find out.

Gregory was by far the greatest Pope of the early middle ages; he was named the fourth early doctor of the church together with Leo, Augustine and Jerome; and that, at his death, the notoriously fickle Roman populace clamoured for him to be immediately created a saint.

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

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 he never took to Greeks or their language Gregory managed to gain the confidence of two successive emperors and, armed with first-hand knowledge of the Byzantine court and its ways, in 585 he was finally able to return to Italy and his monastery, but on the death of Pope Pelagius 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’ were 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.’

lamented Gregory to Patriarch John of Constantinople. In fact 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 in order to alleviate their plight.

Romanus, the exarch of Ravenna, which was still ruled from Constantinople 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 the defence of 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.

By the time Gregory ascended the throne the church had become the biggest land-owner 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, and 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.

This new chancery was also responsible for foreign relations, and in particular those with the Byzantine Empire but relations here rapidly deteriorated, leaving Gregory to look towards Visigothic Spain Frankish Gaul and Anglo-Saxon Britain, 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, already 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, with murders, assassinations and plots sufficient for an entire saga. Gregory had actually 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 rest we know. Warned of the dangers of his mission Augustine turned back from the road, recommending the task be abandoned, but Gregory gave him letters of recommendation and sent him back on his way.

Gregory entertained 12 poor people at table every day of his pontificate, and regarded the wealth of the church’s patrimony 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, a position that has left him with very few friends and admirers ever since. 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 straight into the hands of senior clergy.

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. He 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 wrong he should never be re-instated, lest the faithful be scandalized. His book on pastoral care was sent to every one of Charlemagne’s bishops, and it was he together with the Spanish monarchy who kept his memory alive.

Gregory’s life and work are a testimony to the truth that there is a spirituality in good administration; something many parishioners both in this church and elsewhere need to appreciate, while the preachers and speakers receive all the attention and admiration: Gregory’s sanctity very largely resides in the fact that he achieved all the good that he did in the teeth of opposition from every quarter, both secular and sacred.

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BIRINUS -see under AIDAN.

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ALLEN GARDINER perished of starvation on the shores of Tierra del Fuego in 1851. He was born in 1794, and joined the Royal Navy as a young man. He resigned in 1826 and on the death of his wife in 1834 he devoted himself to missionary work. He pioneered a mission to the Zulus in South Africa, and for the Church Missionary Society. He then went to South America to investigate the possibility of evangelizing amongst the indigenous tribes. He travelled extensively and founded the South American mission society in 1844, with seven other missionaries.

Atwell’s article features quotations from Gardiner’s diary a month before his death: his faith and dedication to God are transparent, and he prays to be able to accept whatever God’s providence may have in store for him. He was clearly an energetic man of very great devotion to God.

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COMMENT

Whether by coincidence or not, this week seems to feature various kinds of mission: Aidan is invited by King Oswald, facilitated in his work and given every encouragement and assistance by the king. Birinus answers a call to evangelise the English folk of Wessex, and finds the king amenable, and the mission is successful. Gregory the Great is best known here for sending Augustine who, after a serious wobble, came to this country and was helped by the queen, who was already a Christian, so that the king behaved in a courteous and open-minded manner, conceding that Augustine and his monks had come a long way to give their message, and that they were welcome to carry on as long as they didn’t expect instant results: of course the king and his people converted in time, largely thanks to the courtesy and good manners that Augustine and his followers had displayed, and which had been returned in good faith by the king.

Thirteen centuries later we meet Allen Gardner and later still the 333 missionaries and their staff who were murdered by Japanese invaders overrunning Papua New Guinea. Neither of these latter missionaries seem to have been invited into the countries they visited, in the case of Gardner and his colleagues first among the Zulu, and later the tribal areas of Latin America.

Earlier in this series we encountered Ini Kopuria in the Solomon Islands, who was a native policeman who took it on himself, with the discrete encouragement of a bishop whose method was to facilitate the natives themselves to work in their own areas and according to their own knowledge of local customs and language. The witness of the success of this strategy is to be seen both there and in the U K today, where very sound and friendly connections exist between communities here and there.

When we looked at Sundar Singh, his calling seems to have been both impaired and compromised by an Anglican establishment that took it for granted that their way of worship was the only true one, and that native evangelists should go on their missions dressed in church clobber and singing hymns and psalms that would have conveyed absolutely nothing to the people they intended that he should convert!

Of the 333 martyrs of Papua New Guinea, only two natives are mentioned; the rest were, at least, interdenominational, although it is not stated that they either co-operated or even communicated. Far too often – and it still happens today – missionaries go stomping around places where they imagine God is calling them to evangelise, with about as little cultural sensitivity as the Japanese soldiers who killed off their victims probably because they were seen as part of the enemy, who also happened to look different from the natives.

Allen Gardner felt called to evangelise the tribal areas of Latin America where, at the time, it may have been that they didn’t even speak Spanish or Portuguese. Gardner perishes on the shores of Tierra del Fuego, writing in his diary very moving and faithful words about accepting God’s providence; and one might ask whether, indeed, it may have been God’s providence or his own hubris that put him in that position in the first place. There seems to be mission strategy and mission theology, and sometimes the two don’t always appear to interface.

Social anthropology is one of the youngest of the social sciences, and consisted principally of Europeans or Americans – almost invariably white, going off to do ‘field work,’ which involved living for a while in an entirely alien community in order to discover their way of life and beliefs, to report back to universities or sometimes the general public.

Two generations ago nobody very much saw any harm in such enterprise, but nowadays all bets are off, and, perhaps at the advocacy of people claiming to represent ‘host communities;’ such study is condemned for the assumptions they carry of cultural superiority, when it is equally assumed that visitors to this country who hail from the .areas of interest to social anthropology are here to learn and acculturate to western values. When a church carries these assumptions into what they term mission, instead of pausing to ask themselves what, in fact, they have to offer, and how effectively they might be able to offer it, bad outcomes are surely to be expected, and triumphalist hindsight as to what God may or may not have accomplished through these seeds of martyrdom is presuming a lot about God, his providence, and the nature of real charity and humility.

On reading the article in Atwell’s book about the murders in New Guinea, one’s first reaction is likely to be of shock: how could these enemy soldiers be so entirely evil? As Christians a reaction like this is profoundly unhelpful on several levels, what did those soldiers, or their commanding officers see; what could possibly have motivated them to behave with such quite indiscriminate cruelty to men and women alike?

In Bede’s accounts of mission that we’ve read this week, the ministries of visiting missionaries were interpreted and facilitated by native rulers, though it must be said that ‘Cuius region, eius religio’ is hardly the perfect way to make converts: there seems to be one way only, and that was the way of Aidan, but best of all, surely Giles?

And did the ‘good Samaritan’ take time out to explain his beliefs to the man whose life he saved? Did God need him to?6