

The Feast Day of St. Augustine of Canterbury on the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, May 29, 2016
St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Christianity came to Britain early - as early as 140 A.D., with the first recorded British martyr being a Roman officer named Albinus – Alban, executed sometime after 209 A.D. By 240 A.D. Patristic scholars were saying that Christianity “was a unifying force among the Britons.” (Origen). In 325 there were British bishops at the Council of Nicea.

By the end of that century the last Roman legion was withdrawn from Britannia, by 450 non-Roman invaders arrived – the Angles and Saxons in particular, and the civilization brought by the Romans collapsed. By 550 Rome acknowledged it had lost Britannia.

Christian faith existed most obviously and actively in the 5th and 6th Centuries at the periphery – in what is, today Ireland, with the Celtic Church planted by Patrick, and the Scottish communities north of Hadrian's Wall. Christian faith existed in the rest of Britain too – but the almost complete absence of records means we know little about it.

What we do know is that the majority culture in that period was pagan, and based on the identity brought by the Angles and the Saxons, who were in the south of Britain for over 150 years before Augustine arrived in 597 A.D. – long enough to feel that the land belonged to them, and to become Anglo-Saxons, and to call their home Angle-Land.

Augustine came because Pope Gregory the 1st (“The Great”) sent him. They were good friends, and Gregory had been a monk at St. Andrew's Abbey in Rome when Augustine was prior. Gregory sent Augustine because Gregory had been entranced by an encounter with Briton slaves, described to him as “Angles.” “His reply was to observe that they were more like “angels” and he determined they must be brought into the Church. So off went Augustine. After some struggles (including fear of the “evil and brutish English”) the group landed in Kent on the southern coast in 597 AD, carrying a silver cross and an image of Jesus Christ painted on a board, which thus became, so far as we know, “England's first icon.”

The Anglo-Saxon pagan King Ethelbert of Kent (whose wife was a Christian) met Augustine outside of his town – Canterbury – and after being impressed with Augustine's grace, humility, and friendliness, expressed his willingness to tolerate their presence, and allowed them to use a church that still exists today – St. Martin's in Canterbury. And the rest – as they say – is history.

What's particularly striking about this story is what Gregory said to Augustine before he left for Angle-Land: **“If you have found customs, whether in the Roman, (Celtic), or any other Churches that may be more acceptable to God, I wish you to make a careful selection of them, and teach the Church of the English, which is still young in the faith, whatever you can profitably learn from the various Churches. For things should not be loved for the sake of places, but places for the sake of good things.”**

Gregory was saying two important things:

1. He expected Augustine to find Christians in Angle-Land, and
2. He expected those Christians – through the trauma of invasion and relegation to the status of minority among those who did not share their faith – he expected those Christians to have discovered gifts about themselves and their faith that should not simply be honored, but embraced as gifts to the wider Church.

Both of those insights help explain why Gregory became known as “The Great” – he had an ability to see

patterns in history, he expected them to reappear, and he realized that they were valuable.

What he saw is important to us, today. You can trace his insight back to the 6th Century B.C. What happened then? The Babylonian Empire conquered the Holy Land and carried off as prisoners the cream of Jewish society. That should have been the end of the Jewish people but actually exactly the opposite occurred. This disaster triggered amazing cultural creativity among these Jewish exiles in Babylon. It's from that time that we can date the worship of One God, the beginnings of Holy Scripture, and the weekly gathering on the seventh day. How did this happen, you might ask? Psalm 137 has the answer: ***“by the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.”*** (137:1). Out of the “defining dislocation of their society” (Brueggemann) they gathered together, they mourned their losses, and they remembered. That's where the synagogue came from – nothing like it existed before. It wasn't – like the Temple – a place housing the presence of God; it was a place of study housing a community who came together to remember what they had inherited.

Gregory invited Augustine to consider that he would not find many buildings when he arrived in Angle-Land; what he would find would be communities of Christians who had experienced a destruction and dislocation that ended up being a “defining dislocation of their society” similar to that of the Jews in 587 B.C. – more than eleven hundred years earlier, a huge upheaval of every dimension of their common lives together. Unlike in a Rome, Gregory was saying, Augustine would more likely find a place where being a Christian wasn't primarily a matter of entering a holy building but joining a gathering of people who come together to study and to mourn, to remember, and to worship, and who had grown as a result. That growing, those new insights, were things to treasure.

Augustine lived in Angle-Land for only about seven years, dying in May of 604 A.D. But the work of drawing the Christian Communities there back into the wider Church began with him. And the nature of those communities has continued to mark out a particularly Britannic form of Christian faith: one about community, studying together, remembering in worship, mourning the losses, celebrating the new gifts and insights, seeking to be more fully the Body of Christ wherever we are planted.

And, it seems to me, that's a pretty good model for who and what we seek to be, here, now, as the heirs of Augustine of Canterbury on this continent, in this time.