

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Editorial

This year is the 1400th anniversary of the arrival of St Augustine of Canterbury and the official beginning of the Church of England. A great deal has been made of this in different quarters, and there has even been a commemorative stamp, which is more than can be said for the anniversary of Thomas Cranmer's birth eight years ago. It also happens to be the 1400th anniversary of the death of St Columba, the founder of Iona and the man who brought Christianity to what is now Scotland. That event too is being celebrated, especially north of the border, even though Columba's relationship to the modern Church of Scotland is a good deal more complex than is Augustine's relationship to the present-day Church of England.

In some ways, that relationship remains remarkably close. Augustine came from Rome with a brief from Pope Gregory the Great to re-establish the church in what had been the Roman province of Britannia. In late Roman times that province had been subdivided, and Gregory expected Augustine to follow the same pattern, with one bishopric in the south, based at London, and another in the north, based at York. When Augustine arrived he was able to set up the northern bishopric as planned, but London eluded him. It was a frontier town then, on the borders of Kent and Essex, and apparently not secure enough to be the seat of a bishopric. Perhaps more importantly, Augustine's sponsor, Ethelbert the king of Kent, wanted him at his court, which was based at Canterbury. So Augustine went there instead, though the lure of London remained to haunt his successors. As it turns out, it was probably in or shortly before 1197 – yet another anniversary this year – that the archbishops acquired Lambeth manor, where they have resided ever since.

Augustine did not remain at Canterbury for long, but his time there has been fully recorded for us by Bede, to whom he was a great hero. It seems that before long most of Kent had been baptized, and Augustine was setting out on wider conquests. In particular, he believed that his brief extended to the native Britons in what we now call Wales, and he made a pitch to them to submit to his authority so that together they could evangelize the heathen English. The Welsh refused to join in, partly because they did not recognize Augustine's authority, having lost touch with Rome some time before, and partly because they saw him, not unreasonably, as an English agent.

All this happened a long time ago, if not very far away, and many people may wonder what relevance it has to our situation today. Some commentators have made great play of the fact that Augustine came from

Rome and claimed that this has great ecumenical significance for us now. Closer investigation however shows that this claim is rather hollow. Both Rome and the Church of England have changed too much, and gone their separate ways for too long, for a reunion along ancient lines to be a realistic possibility now. Augustine was, we know, in the habit of writing to Gregory for advice on governing his newly founded church, but the correspondence between George Carey and John Paul II has been rather different. The present Archbishop of Canterbury may not know what to do any more than Augustine did but, as any female priest will tell you, he is most unlikely to follow the pope's advice.

At another level, the Roman mission had an unrealistic picture of the country to which it was sent, and this produced a system of anachronistic structures which has dogged the Church of England ever since. We should also note the susceptibility of Augustine to state interference, which then as now was perceived by outsiders as an unwelcome subordination to temporal interests. The Anglican Communion today may be more than just the legacy of English imperialism, but that much it certainly is, and the effects can still be felt. Many of the radical innovations in the Anglican world in recent years have come from the erstwhile colonies, whose ecclesiastical governors want to demonstrate just how independent they are. Unfortunately, their actions affect us all whether we like it or not, since there is no way the Communion as a whole can deal with local aberrancies. In the end, our only option is to accept them and adopt them into our own church's life. That is what happened with women priests, and it is quite likely to happen again, both with women bishops and with clergy who are practising homosexuals. Same sex marriage is near at hand, and services of thanksgiving for the end of a marriage (by divorce, of course, not death) are already in existence. The baptism of animals (they are already dedicated) can hardly be delayed much longer, and where will we go from there?

Perhaps, in this year of commemoration, we in the Church of England could take a leaf out of Columba's book. The Iona missionaries evangelized at least half of England in the century after Columba's death, and in the days of Bede it was the north which was the most vigorous part of the church. They were adapted to their environment in a way that the Romans never were nor could be. Basing themselves on monastic communities instead of cities, which did not exist in the Celtic fringe, they were a presence among the native tribes without being absorbed by them. In a very real sense, they were quite like mission stations in modern Africa which reached the tribal culture without becoming part of it. They had a forward-looking vision which eventually took them across Europe, and were devoted patrons of learning, especially the study of the Bible. Not many people today realize it, but Bede was probably the greatest biblical

commentator of the early Middle Ages, and his works were standard devotional reading for centuries.

Of course the Celtic church had its faults, and there is no point romanticizing it, or playing it off against the Romeward-leaning Church of England. Times have changed, and we must change with them. But at the same time, can we not admit that the model of mission that we find in the Iona community is closer to the New Testament pattern than the Roman model imported to Canterbury? And is it not that New Testament pattern which we should be aiming to recover for the church today? We can be grateful for our heritage, but we must not ignore the burdens which it has imposed on us. In remembering the past we should be ready to learn from it, but we must also be prepared to adapt it to the needs of a future which still needs to hear afresh the ancient message of the gospel of grace.

GERALD BRAY