Sermon preached on the Feast of St Augustine of Canterbury, 26th May 2015

in the Chapel of St Augustine of Canterbury at the Anglican Centre in Rome

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The great spoof history textbook *1066 and All That* has a famous parody on Pope Gregory’s pun “not angels but Angles”:

Noticing some fair-haired children in the slave market one morning, Pope Gregory, the memorable Pope, said (in Latin), ‘What are those?’ and on being told that they were Angels, made the memorable joke — *Non Angli, sed Angeli* (‘not Angels, but Anglicans’) and commanded one of his Saints called St Augustine to go and convert the rest.

Not Angels but Anglicans.

The story of the conversion of England, of St Augustine, of St Gregory the Great, is a story which weaves together the church here in Rome and the church in England; the Church of Rome and the Church of England; the Archbishop of Canterbury, successor to St Augustine – and the Pope, successor to St Gregory the Great.

And yet that line, *not Angels but Anglicans*, also has within it the record of dispute.

When Augustine turned up in the old Roman province of Britannia he had something of a shock when he encountered a fully-fledged church already in existence in those parts of the Island which hadn’t been conquered by the Saxons. It was a church, however, which seems not to have encountered the changes brought in over the last century and a half on the continent, most importantly over the date of Easter.

The tension between this residual Roman church and the new Roman church persisted for many years and became the subject of much mythology in the 19th century, the British church often being seen as a proto-Anglican Church: with home-grown bishops and more ancient beliefs and cut-off from contact with the Church in Rome.

*Not Angels but Anglicans.*

The need for Augustine’s mission and the survival of the British church at all speaks to the reality of a hideous period in British history: when the people of Britannia, who still (from what we can tell) considered themselves to be Romans and who had, by this stage, adopted Christianity along with the rest of the Empire, found themselves invaded, slaughtered, driven into the mountains and then dealt the ultimate indignity – they were called *Welsh…*, a word in Saxon which means *foreigner*. Foreigners in their own country. It is notable that once the Saxons arrive in an area, the British are wiped out of history – no British graves have been found, no British cultural goods have been uncovered. It is most likely to have been genocide.

When Augustine was sent to Kent, it was not in expectation of cream teas, warm beer, and cricket on the village green. He was being sent to the most voraciously anti-Christian barbarian tribes in the West. He was being sent to ISIS.

Augustine knew when he was heading to the English that he might very well end up one of the martyrs of our faith. His monks knew it too and mutinied in France, begging to be allowed back to Rome. The first little cartoon on our welcome poster outside the chapel has St Gregory saying “What you have begun, you should finish.” He refused to allow them back and they went, however reluctantly, to their probable death.
When Augustine met the British Christians, he found a people who had held the faith through unimaginable horrors – actually, now, through sadly all-too-imaginable horrors – who had been left to die by their fellow Christians on the continent and were now being told that this faith for which they died was, at best passée, and at worst, heretical.

The study of this period of Christian history is no wasted effort. We read of cultural misunderstanding – as when Augustine failed to stand when the British came to see him, causing great offence. We read of both sides arguing from authority and not by reason. We read of these disputes fading into nothingness when things turn nasty, when 1200 British monks are slaughtered by the Saxon Ethelfrid, or when the new Kentish King returns to paganism and drives out Augustine’s successors.

These sixth and seventh century Christians were living out what Pope Francis calls the Ecumenism of Blood. Two days ago, in a message to a Christian Unity gathering in Arizona he spotted a reality that Augustine and the British monks would have recognised:

But there is someone who “knows” that, despite our differences, we are one. It is he who is persecuting us. It is he who is persecuting Christians today, he who is anointing us with (the blood of) martyrdom. He knows that Christians are disciples of Christ: that they are one, that they are brothers! He doesn’t care if they are Evangelicals, or Orthodox, Lutherans, Catholics or Apostolic… he doesn’t care! They are Christians.¹

Today is an interesting day in the calendar of the Church of England. As well as the feast of St Augustine, it is also the day on which we remember two other notable figures of Christian history.

Many of my friends and colleagues this day will be celebrating the life of St Philip Neri with sung masses and incense and, most likely, lace.

Other friends and colleagues will be remembering John Calvin. I suspect their remembrance will be somewhat different in nature.

Not Angels, … but Anglicans.

The church which grew out of Augustine’s mission began with cultural misunderstanding and theological conflict – but that, of course, is something we can just as easily say of the churches which grew out of St Paul’s mission.

We, who are living in another era marked by the slaughter of Christians, have just as great an imperative to work out how our John Calvins and Philip Neris can work together with our St Columbanus and our St Augustines, with our Chaldean Catholics and our Nigerians Methodists.

To move from quoting today’s pope to a dead American, “We must, indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.”

Amen.

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