

Article 2 - Augustine of Canterbury and the Medieval Church in Britain

When Anglicans think about the history of the Church, many of us naturally begin with the English Reformation, Thomas Cranmer, or the Book of Common Prayer. Yet the roots of Anglicanism reach much deeper into history. Long before Henry VIII, and before the Norman Conquest reshaped England, there was a monk from Rome named Augustine whose mission helped lay the foundations of the English Church.

The story of Augustine of Canterbury is not simply the story of one missionary. It is the story of how Christianity took root among the Anglo-Saxon peoples, how different Christian traditions learned—sometimes reluctantly—to live together, and how the medieval Church in England began to emerge.

It is also a story that reminds us of something important about the Church itself. The Church is always one generation away from being forgotten and one generation away from being renewed. Augustine arrived in Britain at a moment when both possibilities existed. The faith survived in some places and disappeared in others. The future was uncertain, but through the work of Augustine and countless others, Christianity grew and eventually shaped much of English society.

To understand Augustine's significance, we need to begin before he ever set foot on British soil.

Many people assume that Augustine brought Christianity to Britain for the first time. In reality, Christians had been present in Britain for centuries before his arrival.

During the Roman occupation, which began in 43 CE, Christianity gradually spread throughout the Empire. Merchants, soldiers, government officials, and travellers carried the faith with them as they moved throughout the Roman world. By the fourth century, established Christian communities existed in Britain, and British bishops were participating in councils of the wider Church.

When Roman authority collapsed in the early fifth century, Britain entered a period of political instability. As Roman troops withdrew, political structures weakened. New groups arrived from northern Europe, particularly the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. These newcomers brought their own religious traditions, and in many regions, Christianity declined as Anglo-Saxon kingdoms emerged.

In Wales, Cornwall, Ireland, and parts of what is now Scotland, however, Christian communities survived and, in some places, flourished. Monasteries became centres of prayer, learning, and missionary activity. British and Irish Christian traditions continued to proclaim the Gospel throughout these regions. By the end of the sixth century, Britain was a divided religious landscape. Some areas were Christian; others remained largely pagan. It was into this world that Augustine arrived.

Augustine's story begins in Rome during the time of Pope Gregory the Great (590 to 604). A famous story tells us that Gregory once saw fair-haired boys being sold in a Roman slave market. When he learned that they were Angles, he is reported to have made a play on the Latin words *Angli* and *angeli*: "Not Angles, but angels." Whether the story happened exactly as later tradition remembered it is difficult to know, but Gregory clearly had a deep interest in bringing Christianity to the Anglo-Saxon peoples.

In 596 CE, Gregory selected Augustine, prior of the monastery of St. Andrew in Rome, to lead a missionary expedition to Britain.

The journey was not easy. Augustine and his companions heard frightening stories about the Anglo-Saxons and became fearful about continuing. They turned back and sent Augustine to Rome

to ask Gregory for permission to abandon the mission. Gregory refused. Instead, he encouraged Augustine and his companions and sent them on their way again.

Eventually, the missionaries crossed the English Channel and arrived in Kent in 597 CE. Fortunately for Augustine, Kent was perhaps the best place to begin proclaiming the Gospel. King Æthelberht ruled Kent and was one of the most powerful rulers in southern England. More importantly, his wife, Bertha, was a Christian princess from the Frankish royal family. As part of their marriage arrangement, Bertha had been allowed to continue practising her faith and was accompanied by a Christian bishop named Liudhard. Christianity therefore already had a small foothold in Kent before Augustine arrived.

Æthelberht agreed to meet Augustine and his companions. Although he did not immediately convert, he granted the missionaries permission to stay in Canterbury, preach, and practise their faith.

Eventually, Æthelberht accepted baptism. His conversion encouraged others to embrace Christianity as well. In the social realities of the early medieval world, the religion of a ruler could strongly influence the religious direction of the kingdom. Nevertheless, Gregory specifically warned Augustine against forcing people to convert, and Christianity's growth among the Anglo-Saxons was a gradual process.

As the mission began to succeed, Augustine travelled to Gaul, where he was consecrated bishop by Vergilius, Archbishop of Arles. He returned to Kent and established his episcopal seat at Canterbury. Gregory later sent Augustine the pallium and plans for a wider ecclesiastical organization in England. Augustine consequently came to be regarded as the first Archbishop of Canterbury, although the precise development of that title and office was more gradual than the traditional account sometimes suggests.

Augustine also began conversations with British Christian leaders. He hoped they would cooperate with his mission to the Anglo-Saxons and conform to Roman practices on certain disputed matters, particularly the calculation of Easter and aspects of baptismal practice. The meetings did not go well.

For generations, British Christians had watched Anglo-Saxon kingdoms expand into territories once occupied by their ancestors. Deep cultural and political tensions existed between these communities. From Augustine's perspective, cooperation was essential for the mission. From the perspective of many British Christians, however, there was little reason to trust or assist a mission directed toward peoples they regarded as their enemies.

Augustine was unable to resolve these tensions, and the differences between Roman and some Irish and British Christian customs continued after his death. The Synod of Whitby in 664 CE became an important turning point when King Oswiu of Northumbria chose Roman customs over the practices associated particularly with the Irish monastery of Iona, including the Roman method for calculating the date of Easter. Whitby did not unite all Christians in Britain or settle every difference, but it helped strengthen Roman ecclesiastical practices within the Anglo-Saxon Church.

Augustine's greatest contribution was not simply converting people. His lasting achievement was helping to establish the structures necessary for a stable Church among the Anglo-Saxons. Christianity needed more than converts if it was to flourish. It needed communities, clergy, churches, monasteries, and leaders capable of nurturing faith from one generation to the next.

Augustine died sometime between 604 and 609 CE, only a few years after arriving in Britain. Yet his influence continued to grow.

Over the following centuries, Christianity spread throughout Anglo-Saxon England. Monasteries multiplied, dioceses were established, missionaries travelled throughout the kingdoms, and the Church became increasingly woven into the fabric of English society.

Augustine was not the first Christian missionary to Britain, nor did he single-handedly convert England. His importance lies in something more enduring. His mission helped establish a permanent Roman Christian presence among the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and strengthened their connection with the wider Western Church.

Through Augustine and the many missionaries, monks, clergy, rulers, and ordinary Christians who followed, the foundations of the medieval English Church gradually took shape.

As Anglicans looking back on our history, Augustine invites us to remember that the Church is built by faithful people who answer God's call without knowing exactly what the future holds. Like Augustine, they trust that God is already at work before they arrive and that God's purposes will continue long after they are gone.