

*'That they all may
be one'*



Not by Leaps and Bounds

a sixth century church plant - *Gregory and Augustine*

Strategy for mission has not changed in its essentials over the centuries. The seemingly revolutionary often enough has antecedents. Inculturation and liturgical adaptation, for instance, are not simply modern-day inventions.

When Pope St Gregory the Great commissioned Augustine, and some forty of his fellow monks, to preach the gospel to the then mostly pagan people of Britain, at the end of the sixth century, there was to be no question of a rapid takeover bid. Gregory was too astute for that. After all, the members of the mission team were all foreigners, intruding from outside. There was need to be circumspect. They landed in Kent, but one imagines not quite out of the blue. Bertha, wife of the local king Ethelbert, was a Frankish princess and a Christian. This had given an opening. Still, they would have to tread carefully, aiming to win over Ethelbert if they could, then drawing others in his train.

However, too much too soon would have been disastrous, for arrogance and condemnation never win the day, serving instead to antagonise and set up opposition. The old pagan customs could not be swept away over night. Rather, some things would have to be tolerated at first and, as Gregory perceived, old practices must be gradually transmuted into new, former places of worship transformed into Christian shrines instead of being destroyed outright. This is how he puts it, in a letter to be passed on to Augustine, as recorded for us by the Venerable Bede in his Ecclesiastical History (*chap. 30*):

We have been giving careful thought to the affairs of the English, and have come to the conclusion that the temples of the idols in that country should on no account be destroyed. (Augustine) is to destroy the idols, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up, and relics enclosed in them.

These temples . . . are to be purified from devil-worship, and dedicated to the service of the true God. In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that its temples are not destroyed, may abandon idolatry and resort to these places as before, and may come to know and adore the true God.

The old rites and customs are to be treated in a similar way:

*Since these people have a custom of sacrificing many oxen to devils, let some other solemnity be substituted in its place, such as a day of Dedication or the Festivals of the holy martyrs whose relics are enshrined there.
(Ibid).*

Moreover, in his realism, Gregory recognised that these substituted feasts and holy days must be genuine celebrations that would draw and hold the people. There must be an air of holiday about them, even a certain worldliness:

*On such occasions they might well construct shelters of boughs for themselves around the churches that were once temples, and celebrate the solemnity with devout feasting. They are no longer to sacrifice beasts to the Devil, but they may kill them for food to the praise of God, and give thanks to the Giver of gifts for his bounty. If the people are allowed some worldly joys in this way they will more readily come to desire the joys of the spirit.
(Ibid).*

Possibly the pendulum was allowed to swing a little too far in the event, when we think of medieval fairs and the notorious beef-eating English! All the same our current attempts to draw people in through big scale celebrations, new worship styles and evangelistic techniques - even the more intimate and homely shared meal - could claim a long and honoured history.

Gregory goes on to give the reasons for his policy:

It is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at one stroke, and whoever wishes to climb a mountain top climbs gradually step by step, and not in one leap.

It was in this way that God revealed Himself to the Israelite people in Egypt, permitting the sacrifices formerly offered to the Devil to be offered thenceforward to Himself instead.

In an environment where many have heard the gospel and discarded it so that a paganised generation is growing up, there is much in common with the Britain Augustine and his monks were called to re-evangelise. The sixth century English had once known something of the faith but had largely abandoned it. Its replanting, in our own day as in theirs, can only be slow and gradual so we must neither lose heart or give up the struggle. Gregory gave his advice to Augustine and then left him to 'consider how best to implement it on the spot'. So must we.

However, we are not in a vacuum. Behind all local initiatives must be the solid core of the shared Tradition. Behind the big celebrations and gimmicks must be the day to day living out of the faith, the teaching by example rather than by words. What Augustine and his monks brought to sixth century England must be lived out still in every local church setting however limited the resources:

As soon as they (Augustine and his monks) had occupied the house given to them they began to emulate the life of the apostles and the primitive Church. They were constantly at prayer; they fasted and kept vigils; they preached the word of life to whomsoever they could. They regarded worldly things as of little importance, and accepted only necessary food from those they taught. They practised what they preached, and were willing to endure any

hardship, and even to die for the Faith which they proclaimed.
(Bede Eccl. Hist. chap. 26)

Their way of life rubbed off on to those among whom they lived:

A number of heathen, admiring the simplicity of their holy lives and the comfort of their heavenly message, believed and were baptised.
(Ibid.)

So it is that a life lived 'in Christ', in the fulness of the revealed faith, changes the lives of others. But this Tradition, this fulness, though one, is not static or monolithic. It is expressed in a multitude of forms. Gregory, contrary, no doubt to our presuppositions, was not imposing a definitive form of worship on the English people from above, any more than he was sweeping old customs away at a stroke. Much rather, he left Augustine free to develop a distinctive liturgy for his converts, gradually, from various sources - telling him to give the people time to imbibe it so that eventually it would become part of their very selves.

In reply to a query from St Augustine as to why the Gallican churches said Mass in a different way from the Roman, Gregory wrote:

My brother, you are familiar with the usage of the Roman Church, in which you were brought up. But if you have found customs, whether in the Roman, Gallican, 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 . . . Therefore select from each of the Churches whatever things are devout, religious and right; and when you have arranged them into a unified rite, let the minds of the English grow accustomed to it.
(Eccl. Hist. Chap. 27)

English Books of Common Prayer and current liturgical experimentation are not therefore off-beat anomalies but are in direct line with the earliest tradition. The proviso is that changes should not be made haphazardly or every five minutes under personal whim, but decently and in order, with due authority. There must be something durable and worthy, otherwise there is nothing to which the minds and hearts of the people can grow accustomed.

Gregory allows Augustine a similar freedom in the question of the appointment of bishops. A missionary situation often requires modified practice, but established norms must be followed again as soon as circumstances allow. Augustine asks if it is permissible for a bishop to be consecrated without other bishops apart from himself being present (Augustine had himself been consecrated by Etherius Bishop of Arles at the Pope's injunction). Gregory gives the obvious and common sense answer:

In the case of the Church in England where as yet you are the only bishop, you cannot do otherwise than consecrate a bishop without other bishops being present.
(Ibid)

Nevertheless, when possible, bishops from Gaul should be invited over, the Pope suggests, until the position changes. Then:

When in due time bishops are appointed in various places at no great distance from one another, no consecration is to take place except in the presence of three or four bishops.
(Ibid)

Canon Law purists might well be asking about the validity of the Apostolic Succession under such conditions . . . If nobody's orders have been valid in England since Augustine's time then the cat really would be among the pigeons!

But the Church, though divinely instituted and itself the Body of Christ, is nevertheless set in the midst of a fallen world and its members are but penitent sinners on the way to salvation. Our trust, therefore, must be firmly rooted in Christ, Lord of his Church and victor over sin. His purposes will not be thwarted by our blunderings or the changes and seeming chances of life. Like Augustine, in our strategy for mission we shall need both an infinite patience that does not demand instantaneous success, and a willingness to live with the unsatisfactory until God works his work:

. . . in these days the Church has to correct some things strictly, and allow others already established by custom; others may have to be tolerated for a while, in the hope that forbearance may sometimes eradicate an evil of which she disapproves.
(Ibid)

It could even be another fourteen hundred years before current confusions can be resolved in synthesis.