

*'That they all may
be one'*



A BISHOP IN LITTLE

deploying resources - Gregory and Augustine

The greatness of Gregory I, bishop of Rome (540-604) lies as much in his humility as in his imputed role as founder of the medieval Papacy. A Roman Senator and landowner, he sold his vast estates, giving the proceeds to the poor, founded several monasteries and entered one of them (St Andrews in Rome) as a simple monk. Though obliged eventually to join the world of ecclesiastical politics and rank (he was elected Pope in 590) Gregory remained at heart a monk and man of prayer, despite his immense influence in religious and secular affairs alike. As Pope he defined his role as 'Servant of the servants of God'. (*cf. Matt. chap. 20, v. 24-28 and John chap. 13, v. 12-16*).

It is not surprising, then that, having sent Augustine, Prior of St Andrews, with a contingent of monks on an evangelistic mission to England in 597, the Pope should keep a weather eye lest his envoy succumb to pride. Augustine might have had grounds for this since everything appears to have turned out well. There were even rumours of miracles. But St Gregory helped to get things in proportion as we can see from one of his letters recorded by the Venerable Bede in his Ecclesiastical History (*chapter 31*). Here Gregory insists that the success of the mission was because of God's predilection for the English. Augustine, though drawn to the people himself, was simply God's instrument:

My very dear brother, I hear that Almighty God has done great things through you because of your love for the nation which He has chosen. Therefore let your joy be tempered with awe at God's heavenly gifts, and thank Him that the souls of the English are being drawn to inward grace through outward Miracles.

Since these signs and wonders were **God's** means for attaining his end they must not become an incentive to human pride:

At the same time, beware lest the frail mind becomes proud because of these wonderful events, for when it receives public recognition, it is liable to fall into senseless conceit.

It was to be no mere matter of rejoicing over personal achievement, but much more, giving thanks that the names of preacher and converts alike were to be written in heaven. And to rub things in Gregory suggests with wry humour that Augustine should look honestly at himself. Then he would see all too clearly that the miracles had more to do with the worth of his hearers than with anything good he might think to find in himself.

Here, surely, we have a blueprint for ministry in the Church, and especially for those called to exercise leadership and oversight. In imitation of Jesus they are to serve their charges not lord it over them. People matter far more than any blowing of a personal trumpet.

Augustine was a learner, new as a bishop, and a pioneer in a missionary situation. He turned of course to Gregory for help. In Chapter 27 of Bede's History we meet Gregory's replies to some of Augustine's queries. He had asked:

What is to be the relationship between the bishop and his clergy? And how are the offerings made by the faithful at the altar to be apportioned? And what are the functions of a bishop in his church?

We could well wish for a more detailed reply than we are given; it might even seem that Gregory was begging the last question. He deals with it first, with a scriptural reference, before moving on swiftly to the question of finance. (Are we on familiar ground?) However, what sounder advice could the Pope have given, what more is there to say?

Holy Scripture, with which you are certainly well acquainted, offers us guidance in this matter, and in particular the letters of blessed Paul to Timothy, in which he carefully instructs him on a bishop's duties in the House of God.

Then, straight away, Gregory provides the instructions he is accustomed to give to every newly appointed bishop about the deployment of money and gifts. All is to be allocated under four heads:

One for the bishop and his household, for hospitality and other commitments; another for the clergy; a third for the poor; and a fourth for the maintenance of churches.

This is beautifully neat and tidy and all inclusive. The problem of course is in the just working out of the proportions and the control of almost inevitable abuses. That was presumably Augustine's job and part of Gregory's wise policy of letting local bishops sort things out on the spot.

Immediately after this we move to the directly personal, the first part of Augustine's question. There is little chance of him lining his own pockets. The relation of Augustine to his clergy is already clearly marked out for him by his monastic vocation: they will live together under monastic rule. Like an abbot in his monastery, or Gregory in his office as Pope, Augustine is to serve the servants of God. Thus he will not have a personal household or need separate money for hospitality - whatever abuses grew up in later years when abbots and bishops owned vast estates and entertained lavishly. Together with his clergy Augustine was to live like the early believers as recorded in Acts:

You are to follow the way of life practised by our forefathers of the Primitive Church, who regarded no property as personal, but shared all things in common . . . for those who live as a Community there should be no need for us to mention allocating portions, exercising hospitality, and showing mercy. Everything that can be spared is to be devoted to holy and religious purposes, as the Lord and Master of all bids.

This might be fine, we feel, for monks and celibate priests in a different era. In latter years we have veered for the most part towards a more individualistic approach, with the pattern of the nuclear family in the vicarage or manse being seen as the norm. If preferment comes, living standards are necessarily raised. The bishop and family in the palace have so many more unavoidable expenses. They have a position to live up to . . . However, experiments with team ministry and the uniting of benefices (not to mention ecumenical partnerships) is changing all

this. There are even tentative suggestions of a flat rate for all clergy, or of making ministry totally non-stipendiary.

In the new mission situation of our times simplified and radically renewed forms of ministry are indeed called for. Institutions and established structures are being reassessed. Gregory's norms might need to be looked at again.

All the same he was not totally other-worldly. After all, his instructions for deploying finances did allow for non-monastic bishops who would need extra money for their households and for hospitality. He was aware too that clerics in minor orders would usually be married and therefore would need to be considered:

If there are any clerics . . . who do not wish to remain single, let them marry and receive their stipends separately; for it is written . . . 'division is to be made to each according to his need'. So give consideration to the provision of their stipends.

A flat rate is unreasonable - and unjust. The call to sacrificial service is, all the same, open to all. The main principles of monastic living can and should be willingly undertaken by every Christian, for they are none other than the radical demands of the gospel as expressed in the baptismal vows.

Circumstances in the years ahead may well force simplification and that would be no bad thing. The renewal of parish life as an extended family of believers, committed to daily worship and loving service of each other and the community at large, is a dream many would wish to realise. The restoration of the fully pastoral role of the bishop, as a man of God and father of the people, in a diocese small enough to make this possible, is being mooted too - a bishop in small things, serving the servants of God. Let administrators look after the administration and the gifts of the laity be used to the full.

Could this come true? It would be good to go back fourteen hundred years and start all over again with Augustine. But that we can't do. Still, the norms are the same, the Scripture pattern, the grace and the power of God..... we do not lose heart.