

Readings – for a Missionary Bishop

Four years after Augustine and his companions arrived in England in AD 597, Pope Gregory sent a second group to assist in the mission. Among them were at least two future archbishops of Canterbury, and Paulinus, who was to be the first bishop of York, which the Pope had determined should be the second metropolitan see in England.

For twenty-four years Paulinus ministered in Kent, and in July 625 he was consecrated as a bishop, and travelled north. The occasion for this journey was the marriage of Ethelburga, sister of the King of Kent, to King Edwin of Northumbria, a pagan. It was agreed that he would allow her to practice her religion as a Christian, and that she should be accompanied by a chaplain.

Once in the north, Paulinus began to preach the Gospel, and in 627 Edwin with many of his nobles were baptized in a wooden church on the site of York Minister. After the baptism, a stone church was begun, and in the crypt of the present church is a font, traditionally marking the site of the royal baptism. Bede tells us that, on one occasion after this, Paulinus spent thirty-six days at the royal centre at Yeavering (in north Northumberland), baptising converts in the River Glen.

Paulinus spent another six years travelling widely to preach the Gospel. He probably founded the first church in Lincoln, where he consecrated Honorius, another of Augustine's companions, as the fourth archbishop of Canterbury.

But in AD 632 or 633 King Edwin was killed in battle, and Paulinus, with Queen Ethelburga and her infant daughter Eanfled, escaped back to Kent. One of the helpers of Paulinus, the Deacon James, remained in Northumbria, together with other converts, who together maintained a Christian presence until the arrival of Bishop Aidan in 635. Among these young Christians was Hilda, a relative of King Edwin, who would become the influential Abbess of Whitby.

Back in Kent, Paulinus was appointed to the bishopric of Rochester, which had been vacant since its second bishop, Romanus, was drowned in the Mediterranean while on a journey to Rome.

Paulinus served as Bishop of Rochester for eleven years, dying in AD 644, and was buried in the sacristy of the Saxon cathedral. He is surprisingly neglected for one who played such an energetic part in the evangelization of the Anglo-Saxons.