

THE LANDING OF AUGUSTINE,

AND

CONVERSION OF ETHELBERT.

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THE authentic materials for the story of the Mission of Augustine are almost entirely comprised in the first and second books of Bede's "Ecclesiastical History," written in the beginning of the eighth century. A few additional touches are given by Paul the Deacon and John the Deacon, in their Lives of Gregory the Great, respectively at the close of the eighth, and the close of the ninth century; and in Ælfric's "Homily on the Death of Gregory" (A.D. 990—995), translated by Mrs. Elstob. Some local details may be gained from "The Chronicles of St. Augustine's Abbey," by Thorn, and "The Life of St. Augustine," in the *Acta Sanctorum* of May 26, by Gocelin, both monks of St. Augustine's Abbey, one in the fourteenth, and the other in the eleventh century, but the latter written in so rhetorical a strain as to be of comparatively little use, except for the posthumous legends.

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LECTURE DELIVERED AT CANTERBURY, APRIL 28, 1854.

THERE are five great landings in English history, each of vast importance,—the landing of Julius Cæsar, which first revealed us to the civilised world, and the civilised world to us; the landing of Hengist and Horsa, which gave us our English forefathers, and our English characters; the landing of Augustine, which gave us our English Christianity; the landing of William the Conqueror, which gave us our Norman aristocracy; the landing of William III., which gave us our free Constitution.

Of these five landings, the three first and most important were formerly all supposed to have taken place in Kent. It is true that the claims of Deal to be the scene of Cæsar's landing, though capable of a strong, probably of a successful, defence, are not quite what they were before the elaborate argument of the present Astronomer Royal in favour of Pevensey. And, so much doubt has been lately thrown on the historical existence of Hengist and Horsa, that this too must be received with some hesitation. Still, whatever may be said for or against these earlier landings, there is no doubt of the close connection of the landing of St. Augustine, not only with Kent, but with Canterbury.

It is a great advantage to consider the circumstances of this memorable event in our local history, because it takes us immediately into the consideration of events which

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are far removed from us both by space and time—events too of universal interest, which lie at the beginning of the history, not only of this country, but of all the countries of Europe,—the invasion of the Northern tribes into the Roman Empire, and their conversion to Christianity.

We cannot understand who Augustine was, or why he came, without understanding something of the whole state of Europe at that time. It was, we must remember, hardly more than an hundred years since the Roman Empire had been destroyed, and every country was like a seething caldron, just settling itself after the invasion of the wild barbarians who had burst in upon the civilised world, and trampled down the proud fabric, which had so long sheltered the arts of peace, and the security of law. One of these countries was our own. The fierce Saxon tribes, by whomsoever led, were to the Romans in Britain what the Goths had been in Italy, what the Vandals had been in Africa, what the Franks had been in France ; and under them England had again become a savage nation, cut off from the rest of the world, almost as much as it had been before the landing of Julius Cæsar. In this great convulsion it was natural that the civilisation and religion of the old world should keep the firmest hold on the country and the city, which had so long been its chief seat. That country, as we all know, was Italy, and that city was Rome. And it is to Rome that we must now transport ourselves, if we wish to know how and from whence it was that Augustine came—by what means, under God, our fathers received the light of the Gospel.

In the general crash of all the civil institutions of the Empire, when the last of the Cæsars had been put down, when the Roman armies were no longer able to maintain their hold on the world, it was natural that the Christian clergy of Rome, with the Bishop at their head, should have been invested with a new and unusual importance. They retained the only sparks of religious or of civilised life, which the wild German tribes had not destroyed, and they accordingly remained still erect amidst the ruins of almost all besides.

It is to one of these clergy, to one of these Bishops of

Rome, that we have now to be introduced ; and, if in the story we are about to hear, it shall appear that we derived the greatest of all the blessings we now enjoy from one who filled the office of Pope of Rome, it will not be without its advantage, for two good reasons: First, because, according to the old proverb, every one, even the Pope, must have his due—and it is as ungenerous to deny him the gratitude which he really deserves, as it is unwise to give him the honour to which he has no claim ; and, secondly, because it is useful to see how different were all the circumstances which formed our relations to him then and now ; how, although bearing the same name, yet in reality the position of the man and the office, his duties towards Christendom, and the duties of Christendom towards him, were as different from what they are now, as almost any two things are one from the other.

It is then on Gregory the Great that we are to fix our attention. At the time we are first to meet him, he was not yet Pope. He was still a monk in the great monastery of St. Andrew, which he had himself founded, and which still exists, on the Cælian Mount at Rome, standing conspicuous amongst the Seven Hills—marked by its crown of pines—rising immediately behind the vast walls of the Colosseum, which we may still see, and which Gregory must have seen every day that he looked from his convent windows.

This is not the place to discuss at length the good and evil of his extraordinary character, or the position which he occupied in European history, almost as the founder of Western Christendom. I will now only touch on those points which are necessary to make us understand what he did for us and our fathers. He was remarkable amongst his contemporaries for his benevolence and tenderness of heart. Many proofs of it are given in the stories which are told about him. The long marble table is still shown at Rome where he used to feed twelve beggars every day. There is a legend that on one occasion a thirteenth appeared among them, an unbidden guest—an angel, whom he had thus entertained unawares.

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There is also a true story, which tells the same lesson—that he was so much grieved on hearing of the death of a poor man, who, in some great scarcity in Rome, had been starved to death, that he inflicted on himself the severest punishment, as if he had been responsible for it. He also showed his active charity in one of those seasons, which give opportunity to all faithful pastors, and all good men, for showing what they are really made of, during one of the great pestilences which ravaged Rome immediately before his elevation to the pontificate. All travellers who have been at Rome will remember the famous legend, describing how, as he approached at the head of a procession, chanting the Litany, to the great mausoleum of the Emperor Hadrian, he saw in a vision the Destroying Angel on the top of the tower sheathing his sword; and from this vision, the tower, when it afterwards was turned into the Papal fortress, derived the name of the Castle of St. Angelo. Nor was his charity confined to this world. His heart yearned towards those old Pagan heroes or sages who had been gathered to their fathers without hearing of the name of Christ. He could not bear to think, with the belief that prevailed at that time, that they had been consigned to destruction. One especially there was, of whom he was constantly reminded in his walks through Rome—the great Emperor Trajan, whose statue he always saw rising above him at the top of the tall column which stood in the market-place, called from him the Forum of Trajan. It is said, that he was so impressed with the thought of the justice and goodness of this heathen sovereign, that he earnestly prayed in St. Peter's Church, that God would even now give him grace to know the name of Christ and be converted. And it is believed, that from the veneration which he entertained for Trajan's memory, this column remained when all around it was shattered to pieces; and so it still remains, a monument both of the goodness of Trajan, and the true Christian charity of Gregory. Lastly, like many, perhaps like most remarkable men, he took a deep interest in children. He instructed the choristers of his convent himself in those famous chants which bear his name. The

book from which he taught them, the couch on which he reclined during the lesson, even the rod with which he kept the boys in order, were long preserved at Rome; and in memory of this part of his life, a children's festival was held on his day as late as the 17th century.¹

I may seem to have detained you a long time in describing these general features of Gregory's character. But they are necessary to illustrate the well-known story² which follows, and which was preserved, not, as it would seem, at Rome, but amongst the grateful descendants of those who owed their conversion to the incident recorded. There was one evil of the time—from which we are now happily free—which especially touched his generous heart,—the vast slave-trade which then went on through all parts of Europe. It was not only as it once was in the British empire, from the remotewilds of Africa, that children were carried off and sold as slaves, but from every country in Europe. The wicked traffic was chiefly carried on by Jews and Samaritans;³ and it afterwards was one especial object of Gregory's legislation to check so vast an evil. He was, in fact, to that age what Wilberforce and Clarkson, by their noble Christian zeal, have been to ours. And it may be mentioned, as a proof both of his enlightened goodness, and of his interest in this particular cause, that he even allowed and urged the sale of sacred vessels, and of the property of the Church, for the purpose of redeeming captives. With this feeling in his mind he one day went with the usual crowd that thronged to the market-place at Rome, when they heard, as they did on

¹ Lappenberg's *Hist. of England* (Eng. Tr.), i. 130.

² The story is told in Bede, II. i. § 89, and from him is copied, with very slight variations, by all other ancient mediæval writers. It has been told by most modern historians, but in no instance that I have seen with perfect accuracy, or with the full force of all the expressions employed. As Bede speaks of knowing it by tradition, "traditione majorum," he may, as a Northumbrian, have heard it from the families of the Northumbrian slaves. But most probably it was preserved in St. Augustine's monastery at Canter-

bury, and as the earliest of "Canterbury Tales," it seemed worthy of being here repeated with all the illustrations it could receive. There is nothing in the story intrinsically improbable; and, although Gregory may have been actuated by many motives of a more general character, such as are ably imagined by Mr. Kemble, in the interesting chapter on this subject in his "Saxons in England," yet perhaps we learn as much by considering in detail what in England at least was believed to be the origin of the mission.

³ See Milman's "History of the Jews," iii. 208.

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this occasion, that new cargoes of merchandise had been imported from foreign parts. It was possibly in that very market-place, of which I have before spoken, where the statue of his favourite Trajan was looking down upon him from the summit of his lofty pillar. To and fro, before him, amongst the bales of merchandise, passed the gangs of slaves, torn from their several homes, to be sold amongst the great families of the nobles and gentry of Italy—a sight such as may still be seen (happily nowhere else) in the remote East, or in the southern states of North America. These gangs were doubtless from various parts; there were the swarthy hues of Africa; there were the dark-haired and dark-eyed inhabitants of Greece and Sicily; there were the tawny natives of Syria and Egypt. But amongst these, one group arrested the attention of Gregory beyond all others. It was a group of three¹ boys, distinguished from the rest by their fair complexion and white flesh, the beautiful expression of their countenances, and their light flaxen hair, which, by the side of the dark captives of the south, seemed to him almost of dazzling brightness,² and which, by its long curls, showed that they were of noble origin.

Nothing gives us a stronger notion of the total separation of the northern and southern races of Europe at that time, than the emotion which these peculiarities, to us so familiar, excited. He stood and looked at them; his fondness for children of itself would have led him to pity them; that they should be sold for slaves struck (as we have seen) on another tender chord in his heart; and he asked from what part of the world they had been brought. The slave merchant, probably a Jew, answered, "From Britain, and there all the inhabitants have this bright complexion."³

¹ Thorn, 1737. "Tres pueros." He alone gives the number.

² "Candidi corporis," BEDE; "lactei corporis," PAUL THE DEACON, c. 17; "venusti vultus, capillorum nitore," JOHN THE DEACON; "crine rutilâ," GOCCELIN; "Capillos præcipui candoris," PAULUS DIAC.; "capillum formâ egregiâ," BEDE; "noble (*athelice*) heads of hair," ÆLFRIC. It is from these last

expressions, that it may be inferred that the hair was unshorn, and therefore indicated that the children were of noble birth.—See Palgrave's "History of the Anglo-Saxons," p. 58; Lappenberg's Hist. of England, i. 136.

³ "De Britannîe insulâ, cujus incolarum omnis facies simili candore fulgescit." (*Acta Sancti*. p. 141, JOHN THE DEACON, i. 21.)

It would almost seem as if this was the first time that Gregory had ever heard of Britain. It was indeed to Rome nearly what New Zealand is now to England, and one can imagine that fifty years ago, even here, there may have been many, even of the educated classes, who had a very dim conception of where New Zealand was, or what were its inhabitants. The first question which he asked about this strange country, was what we might have expected. The same deep feeling of compassion that he had already shown for the fate of the good Trajan, now made him anxious to know whether these beautiful children—so innocent, so interesting—were Pagans or Christians. “They are Pagans,” was the reply. The good Gregory heaved a deep sigh¹ from the bottom of his heart, and broke out into a loud lamentation expressed with a mixture of playfulness, which partly was in accordance with the custom of the time,² partly perhaps was suggested by the thought that it was children of whom he was speaking. “Alas! more is the pity, that faces so full of light and brightness should be in the hands of the Prince of Darkness, that such grace of outward appearance should accompany minds without the grace of God within!”³ He went on to ask what was the name of their nation, and was told that they were called “Angles” or “English.” It is not without a thrill of interest that we hear the proud name which now is heard with respect and awe from the rising to the setting sun, thus uttered for the first time in the metropolis of the world—thus awaking for the first time a response in a Christian heart. “Well said,” replied Gregory, still following out his play on the words—“rightly are they called Angles, for they have the face of angels, and they ought to be fellow-heirs of angels in Heaven.” Once more he asked, “What is the name of the province from which they were brought?” He was told that they were “Deirans,”

¹ “Intimo ex corde longa trahens suspiria,” BEDE.

² The anonymous biographer of Gregory in the *Acta Sanctorum*, March 12, p. 130, rejoices in the Pope’s own name

of good omen, “Gregorius,” quasi “Vigilantius.”

³ “Tam lucidi vultus . . . auctor tenebrarum . . . gratiâ frontis . . . gratiâ Dei,” BEDE; “Black Devil,” ÆLFRIC.

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that is to say, that they were from Deira¹ (the land of "wild beasts," or "wild *deer*,") the name then given to the tract of country between the Tyne and the Humber, including Durham and Yorkshire. "Well said, again," answered Gregory, with a play on the word that can only be seen in Latin,—“rightly are they called Deirans, plucked as they are from God’s ire (*de irâ Dei*), and called to the mercy of Christ.” Once again he asked, “And who is the king of that province?” “Ella,” was the reply. Every one who has ever heard of Gregory, has heard of his Gregorian chants, and of his interest in sacred music; the name of Ella reminded him of the Hebrew words of praise which he had introduced into the Roman service,² and he answered, “Allelujah! the praise of God their Creator shall be sung in those parts.”³

So ended this dialogue—doubly interesting because its very strangeness shows us the character of the man and the character of his age. This mixture of the playful and the serious—this curious distortion of words from their original meaning—was to him and his times the natural mode of expressing their own feelings and of instructing others. But it was no passing emotion which the sight of the three Yorkshire boys had awakened in the mind of Gregory. He went from the market-place to the Pope, and obtained from him at once permission to go and fulfil the design of his heart, and convert the English nation to the Christian faith.

He was so much beloved in Rome, that great opposition (it was felt) would be made to his going; and therefore he started from his convent with a small band of his companions in the strictest secrecy. But it was one of the many cases that we see in human life, where even the best men are prevented from accomplishing the objects they have most at heart. He had advanced three days along the great northern road, which leads through the Flaminian gate from Rome to the Alps. When⁴ they

¹ Deore—Thier—deer.—See Soames’ “Anglo-Saxon Church,” 31.

² See Fleury, H. E. xxxvi. 18.

³ See the account of Gregory’s own

Commentary on Job, as shortly given in Milman’s “Hist. of Latin Christianity,” vol. i. 435.

⁴ “Vit. S. Greg.”—PAUL THE DEACON.