

WILLAN WEST CELEBRATION

The Rev. Robert G. Eaton, Interim Rector
All Saints' Episcopal Church, San Diego, CA
Solemn Mass with Willan Music
Commemorating Augustine of Canterbury

We've been inundated over the last few months, and especially within the last week or so, with the marriage of Prince Harry and the American commoner Meghan Markle. Really, now.

But to make it even more interesting, our own Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, was invited to be the preacher. And he did. Beforehand, it was all quite hush-hush as they say, with even the demands for secrecy to Bishop Curry. In fact for Episcopalians, since we were all scratching our heads, and then abuzz about this colonialist bishop being such a visible part of the royal family's doings, we almost forgot there was somebody getting married. Oh, yeah, them too.

This morning our parish was blessed with the teaching of a local retired priest who had been on Bishop Curry's diocesan staff when in North Carolina. With the preaching so close still, it suddenly seemed our seminar leader had been given an additional injection of credibility.

In any case, In the history of the Western world, and the Eastern world, especially whenever we look at royal marriages, the world has presumed that such marriages, besides perhaps being arranged, at the very least carried political and economic overtones for either one or the other of the royal, and thus national, pursuits.

Unfortunately, I'm pretty sure Meghan Markle despite the now Duchess of Sussex, doesn't fit that category. But who knows. Perhaps it was a message and deal between Britannia and the United States in trade, or even between the Church of England and its upstart daughter the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America.

Enter the Anglo-Saxon King Aethelbert, of the area known as Kent, a portion of southeast Britain. He married a woman, Bertha, who was a royal princess, a

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successor of the powerful, and still growing, Frankish kingdom. These were Germanic speaking peoples who overran what we now know as northern France (which is why France is called France), and a portion of Belgium. Aethelbert was a successor of the Anglo-Saxon overrunning of Britain (which is why Angleland is called England), and they were Germanic. It makes sense then that Aethelbert, keeping up across the channel with affinity groupings, would make a strategic decision to marry someone from the Franks. It was a masterful decision, as it brought political interaction and visibility, and economic trade into southeastern Britain, further establishing Aethelbert's adept administration. And of course, the potential of connected successors to his throne if he could just hold onto it long enough. He might even have known that the princess he was marrying was a Christian. And that she would bring with her a Frankish Christian bishop, basically as her chaplain, but with overtones of representation of Christian influence and court connection himself.

You know, descendancy, or succession, can be tricky business, no matter whether called to it or not. And it does not guarantee a smooth transition. When Healy Willan retired after 50 plus years as organist in Toronto, the parish did hire another organist / choir director. You had to know that trying to follow in the footsteps of ANY body who has been in office for that very long time almost guarantees not success, but a quick departure. Sure enough, whether Willan had a hand in picking his own successor or not, the man was gone after 5 years. The same thing happens in the church. When a priest or pastor has been in place for 25 or more years, it is almost a given that he or she will be gone by 3 years. They just are the same as old Father so and so.

Back to Kent and southeastern Britain, enter the entourage sent on mission by Gregory the Great, with his appointee Augustine. It is the very end of the 590's. And it, too, was a very strategic decision. That Princess and then Queen Bertha had gone to Britain from the Frankish royal court had not been lost on Pope Gregory, and he was looking for a succession, of sorts, of the Roman Church into areas that had not lost their influence, and were potentially new areas for expansion. Augustine had been summoned from Sicily into St Andrew's priory near Rome. Gregory was of that same priory, and knew the various Benedictine monks who were showing great promise, up and comers. Augustine had already shown ability to logistically administer, knew an enormous amount of Bible and

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taught it. Finally when the idea to send emissaries to Kent, it would be Augustine, and 20 of his priory monks to go on this mission of reclamation. There were British bishops and dioceses, clearly. But things were in disarray, and separated in Britain. Knowing of the Christian Queen, Gregory decided to send.

So Augustine went. He didn't have any "missionary" experience, simply a trust and faith.

There was one little hiccup. AS the monks were on their way across Europe and moving into Frankish territory it appears someone gave them a heads up about the ferocity of the Anglo Saxons.

It reminds me of one of those Google moments these days.

The monks begged Augustine to go back to Rome, and he relented. Upon return Gregory would send them back. But this time armed with official letters, and more. On their way back across Frankish lands, the pope had encouraged support of the mission, and they were joined by 20 priests who would act as interpreters for the Italian monks when they got to Kent.

And they arrived, and Augustine kneeled down on the beach and immediately began singing the Litany, knowing he was going to be in great need of God's strength and guidance. Augustine lived another 8 years there in Kent. By other standards, he didn't start a country revival, but he did provide a foundation of administrative flow, and Bible teaching, and during his time, the conversion of Aethelbert himself.

The Gospel today tells us that we are still on mission for the Kingdom of God. And it tells us that no matter who we are, where we come from or where we are going, as God's chosen People, inheritors of the kingdom of God, we know it is God's strength and power which will see us through, and not any other royal connection. The seventy disciples were sent because they believed, not because of pedigree. They believed in what Jesus was doing, and then they saw the same through their ministrations, and they returned joyful.

Listen to the call of the Spirit as you follow the Lord Jesus. Be prepared to go wherever God strategically sends you. Shod your feet with the preparation of the Gospel of peace. Be his people in the world to bring his kingdom to bear.

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In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

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