Homily for Aidan, Bishop of Lindisfarne, August 31, 651
August 31, 2020
By the Reverend Stephen Gerth
1 Corinthians 9:16–23, Psalm 85:7–13, Matthew 19:27–30

When Augustine and his companions arrived from Rome on the south coast of England in 597, he was welcomed by the pagan king of Kent, who had married a Frankish Christian princess. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* says that Augustine was sent "to refound the Church in England."[1] But, as historian Diarmaid MacCulloch writes, the church was already there. When Augustine reached Canterbury, Canterbury already had a bishop who ministered to the Frankish colony.[2]

Augustine arrived in England having been prior of a monastery in Rome. It's not entirely sure when he was ordained bishop, but I found a reference to two letters written by Pope Gregory the Great in 597 to him being a bishop.[3]

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[1] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2010), 337.

[2] *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Augustine, St., of Canterbury," 108.

[3] Nicholas Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury: Christ Church from 597 to 1066* (London: Leicester University Press, 1984), 5.

Augustine discovered a Christianity that had survived, cut off from the Roman Empire, and, it seems, the church across the channel. Before Augustine's death in 604 or 605, he provided the first bishops for Rochester and London's dioceses.[4] The serious work of bringing unity to the Christian community in England happened after Augustine and Aidan's deaths, who died on this day in the year 651. The big issues were church organization and discipline—and how to calculate the date of Easter. There was a Synod at Whitby in 664,[5] followed by meetings of English bishops in Hertford in 673 and in Hatfield in 679.[6] Professor MacCulloch points out that, although there was no political unity in England, there was a united church.[7]

Lindisfarne is an island off the English coast very close to Scotland. In the seventh century, it was part of the kingdom of Northumbria. The monk Aidan, from the monastic community at Iona, was made bishop by the diocese of York and sent to Lindisfarne to found missionary outposts.[8] His life was chronicled by Bede the Venerable, which, I suspect, accounts for

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[4] ODCC, 108.
[5] MacCulloch, 343.
[6] Ibid., 340.
[7] Ibid.
[8] ODCC, 27.

these words in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church:*

"[Alban's] ascetism and gentleness won rapid success for his mission, and his personal relations with [King] Oswald and Oswald's successor, St. Oswin . . . were close and intimate."[9]

I haven't read MacCulloch's book *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* from cover to cover. I use it as a reference. Commenting on missionary Christianity on the northern edges of the former empire, he writes, "Above all, Christians everywhere had a big advantage in being associated with the ancient power that obsessed all Europe: imperial Rome . . . Everyone wanted to be Roman: the memory of the empire stood for wealth, wine, central heating and filing systems . . . The missionaries of Christianity talked to [people] of love and forgiveness shaping the purposes of God, and there is no reason to believe that ordinary people were too obtuse to perceive that this could be good news."[10]

I don't know that I will ever know much more about Aidan than I do today, but MacCulloch's words, "love and forgiveness shaping the purposes of God," made

[9] Ibid.
[10] MacCulloch, 343–44.

me stop and take a breath. I'm going to sit with these words for a while.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.