

**Homily for Theodore of Tarsus,
Archbishop of Canterbury, 690**

September 19, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

2 Timothy 2:1–10; Psalm 34:9–14; Matthew 24:42–47*

Things were messy for the church in England when Pope Vitalian chose a monk, born in Saint Paul’s birthplace of Tarsus, to be the sixth archbishop of Canterbury. I wasn’t sure what I would discover this morning when I started work on my homily. But I’m glad it’s my turn to be standing here today.

In my homily for the commemoration of Aidan, bishop of Lindisfarne, who died on August 31, in the year 651, I remarked that when Augustine arrived in England, “he discovered a Christianity that had survived, cut off from the Roman Empire, and, it seems, the church across the channel . . . The serious work of bringing unity to the Christian community in England happened after Augustine and Aidan’s deaths . . . The significant issues were church organization and discipline—[among them] how to calculate the date of Easter. There was a Synod at Whitby in 664,¹ followed by meetings of English bishops in Hertford

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

in 673 and Hatfield in 679.² Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch, in his book, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, points out that, although there was no political unity in England, there was a united church.³ It was the ministry of Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus who united English Christians.

At the beginning of the seventh century, Tarsus, the city of Saint Paul's birth, and later Athens, where Theodore was educated,⁴ were still part of the Eastern Roman Empire whose central lands had not yet been invaded. But invasions by Persians and others were on their way. With the death of the Prophet Mohammed in the year 632, Arab Bedouins defeated a Byzantine army in 636. In 642, the great city of Alexandria fell. Yet a monk from Tarsus would make it to Rome. According to the Venerable Bede, Theodore was consecrated archbishop of Canterbury by Pope Vitalian on Sunday, March 26, in the year 668 and left Rome for Canterbury on the 27th of May. A year later, he arrived in Canterbury.

² Ibid., 340.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Theodore of Tarsus, St.," 1360.

In his introduction to the 1990 Penguin Books edition of Bede's famous *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, D.H. Farmer described the pope's choice as "inspired but unexpected."⁵ At the time of his consecration, he was sixty-six years old. He died at the age of eighty-eight. He was archbishop for "twenty-one years, three months, and twenty-six days."⁶ He reorganized the church, carving smaller dioceses out of much larger one. Under his leadership, a school to train clergy was established at Canterbury.⁷

One final note. This morning I ended up reading a little bit about the Eastern Roman Empire. I don't recall knowing about the Plague of Justinian, reconquered Rome and north Africa, and built Hagia Sophia. Encyclopedia Britannica says, "The first great plague pandemic to be reliably reported occurred during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I in the 6th century [Christian Era]. According to the historian Procopius and others, the outbreak began in Egypt and moved along maritime trade routes, striking Constantinople in 542."⁸ It was not a virus, but a

⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, (e. book), ed. D. Farmer, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 28–29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/science/plague/History>, (accessed 19 September 2020).

bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*, the bubonic plague. It's still around.⁹ I hope the days the pandemic in our time may be shortened.

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

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⁹ Ibid.