

FOREWORD

by Benedicta Ward, SLG

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments.

T.S. Eliot *Four Quartets*, 'East Coker'

The coming of Augustine from Italy to the English in Kent and that of Aidan from Iona to the peoples north of the Humber must be counted among the 'timeless moments' which form the pattern of the history of these islands. Their work was recorded in the pages of the incomparable historian, Bede, where their preaching 'by word and by example' was presented as the new beginning of Christianity in the *alter orbis* of Britain.

The mission in the south of England was marked by the zeal of Gregory the Great, whom Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History* affectionately called 'our apostle', the pope who earnestly longed to come to England himself, and who eventually sent the monk Augustine with a band of forty companions. They were motivated not by force or ambition or even converting fervour of a narrow kind but by the flame of charity which desires to communicate the greatest of gifts to others:

They came . . . bearing as their standard a silver cross and the image of our Lord and Saviour painted on a panel. They . . . uttered prayers to the Lord . . . for the salvation of those for whom and to whom they had come.

They spent the first weeks in prayer in the church of St Martin in Canterbury, thus linking themselves with Martin of Tours, the earlier monk-missionary of Gaul. The presence there of Bertha, the Christian queen, and their contact with her pagan husband, Aethelbert, began the link between church and state which was to prove so fruitful for both. A similar pattern can be seen in the North, where Aidan preached and prayed and baptised in close friendship with the kings and queens, and with the same loving care; indeed, he had volunteered to go to the Northumbrians to replace a more stern predecessor, and 'offer them the milk of simpler teaching'. (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, iii, 5. p. 229)

With such an example of the successful conversion of a nation by love, it is no wonder that Boniface wrote to Jarrow to ask for copies of the works of Bede, whom he called 'a lantern of the church',

the inspired recorder of the coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England, to help in his preaching, in Germany.

Mr Dales has presented all this and more in his book – which comes most aptly in this anniversary year, one thousand and four hundred years after the coming of Augustine and his companions – setting their work in the context of the earlier contacts with the barbarians by Martin, Patrick, Samson, Gildas, Columba and Columbanus, and of the later work of Boniface and Theodore. It is a study based on careful and accurate scholarship, but presented as a voyage of discovery and a meeting with friends, most of all with Flecker's

Monks of Rome from their home
Where the blue seas break in foam,
Augustine with his feet of snow.

It is also a book which by exploring the past discerns ways in which this inheritance can illuminate the present, surrounding it with 'a great cloud of witnesses'.

Benedicta Ward SLG Oxford 1997