

Sermon, 11th October 2009, HT evening prayer

“James the Deacon”

Benjamin Franklin is quoted as saying “great modesty often hides great merit”.

Today, 11th October, is the commemoration in the Anglican calendar of a little-known individual, James the Deacon, who during his lifetime only ever played a supporting role to someone else,

.....but who nevertheless made a significant contribution to the English church service as we know it today even though he died over 1300 years ago.

In fact on the three consecutive days of 10th, 11th and 12th October we commemorate three men, whose dates overlap, James being the middle one of the three, who was connected to both the others.

These three played quite a big part in bringing Christianity to the British Isles in those dark ages..... The centuries following the abandonment of the land by the Roman legions in the 5th Century AD.

They run in chronological order, for yesterday, 10th October, we commemorated Paulinus, an Italian who was sent to England as a missionary by Pope Gregory.

He arrived with a letter suggesting that an archbishopric should be established in York, for the Northern half of England. However, after arriving, he spent the first 25 years or so helping St Augustine in his work of converting the people of Kent and South East England to Christianity.

He didn't exactly rush to travel to the wild lands of the North!

Eventually, however, he set out for the north, accompanying the daughter of King Aethelbert of Kent on her journey north to marry King Edwin of Northumbria, and just before leaving Kent, he was consecrated Bishop of Northumbria – presumably in the hope that he would persuade Edwin and his chiefs to become Christian.

He certainly did that, by compulsive preaching, and even persuaded the King's then high priest, to demolish the huge pagan temple that they had been using.

Indeed, Paulinus started the first stone-built church at York, near the place where the present day minster is situated.

Paulinus was a hard worker, and he baptised the people of the north, using many of the rivers of Yorkshire, Northumberland, and the borders, and building churches from Lincoln to the banks of the Forth and the Clyde rivers.

At some time, possibly at the outset of his mission northwards he was joined by another Italian, almost 20 years younger, James the Deacon, who helped him, working tirelessly to bring the Gospel to the people.. Soon after, Paulinus was consecrated as the first Archbishop of York.

However, only some 8 years after moving to the North, King Edwin was defeated in battle by the pagans and it became unsafe for Paulinus to remain as Archbishop, so he returned south, with Edwin's widow and her children, to return to Kent. Paulinus was given the Diocese of Rochester which he presided over until his death 11 years later.

However, James the Deacon, whom we commemorate today, remained in Lincolnshire, in the dependent kingdom of Lindsey, and he carried on the missionary activity for a further 30 years.

James, as well as being Italian, was a trained singer. It was he that taught Gregorian chant to the monks, and it is he that we should thank for instructing them in the art of singing this style of music in the great religious houses of northern England.

Gregorian chant has been performed in churches now since those early days and as our own Martin Holford has described in his excellent talks on history of church music, formed the basis of ecclesiastical singing.

His next involvement, though, was with the third of our trio of saints. Wilfred of Ripon whom we commemorate tomorrow on 12th October was born in the same year that Paulinus hurriedly moved back to Kent. He became a monk at Lindisfarne and presumably fairly quickly must have gained advancement as Abbot of Ripon.

Both he and James the Deacon, who was still working hard at his missionary work, and still in a supporting role as a deacon, became involved in what was known as the Synod of Whitby, held in the year 664. That was a one-off conference of the great church minds of the time, from both England, and Ireland, one of the main objects being to agree how to calculate the date of Easter.

Although the Council of Nicaea had agreed a common date for calculating Easter, things had begun to get out of kilter because various calendars, the Gregorian, the Roman and the Alexandrian one had all diverged.

Wilfred had the job of persuading the synod to adopt the Roman calendar, which they did, and from then on, the date of Easter was fixed within England and Ireland, the two main centres of Christianity in the British Isles at that time.

Wilfred went on to become Bishop of Northumbria where he believed that Bishops should have a large territory, wealth and political power in order to enable them to plant churches around the country.

He used his influence wisely, and continued to expand his ministry, including building what was at that time, the largest church building north of the Alps, at Hexham, though that building was later replaced by a Norman one.

However, he was somewhat controversial, and managed to upset the Kings of Northumberland on several occasions, being banished for his pains. On his first banishment he travelled to Rome, but spent some months preaching to pagan Anglo-Saxons in Frisia

...(which seems to suggest his sense of direction was adrift, as I believe that to be in what is now Denmark), - not necessarily on a direct route between York and Rome.

On his second exile, he came southwards and brought the Christian faith to the people of Sussex and Wessex.

Although Guildford as such probably didn't exist, He may well have passed through this very area as there were well-defined trackways through and along the Downs passing near here.

Although both Paulinus and Wilfred, as Bishops have the greater profile, I think that it is James, James the Deacon whom I admire the most.

He never sought higher office, but worked hard assisting Paulinus in his missionary activity.

When the going became tough and dangerous, and Paulinus moved south to safety, James stuck it out in the North, continuing his missionary activity for a further 30 years until his death at the age of over 70 years of age..

By teaching Gregorian chant to those who followed their vocations in the many monasteries of Northern Britain, James helped to secure its place in our liturgy today.

Taking a significant part in the Synod of Whitby, James is credited with having passed on the information about what happened there to the Venerable Bede, who wrote it all up in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.

Undoubtedly James, and people like him followed the sentiment of the final few words of today's second reading from Matthew's Gospel, and lived them out.

But not just the familiar comfortable words, of Christ, "come to me all who travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest",

...but the follow-up ones "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me: for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls".

I think Benjamin Franklin may have been thinking about such people as James, and the hundreds of others like him when he gave that quote about modesty and merit.

Amen.