

FEAST OF ST. GREGORY THE GREAT

St. Gregory the Great is known for many things, not least his earnest desire to evangelise the English, or the Angles and ‘angels’ of England, and his sending of St. Augustine to do just this. But his first desire had been to live the life of a monk. When he was acclaimed Pope in the year 590 by the clergy and people of Rome on the death of Pope Pelagius II, it was with great reluctance that he took up the post and he made this reluctance clear in a famous treatise entitled *The Book of Pastoral Care* or, more accurately, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, not without parallel with the Rule of St. Benedict with which he was probably well acquainted by that time and may well have followed as a monk and as Abbot of St. Andrew’s monastery in Rome. It is, indeed, another little Rule for beginners and written specifically to dissuade anyone from seeking office for their own sakes. In this sense, it’s an act of love and admonition, but not only to anyone wanting to be a priest or a bishop but wanting to be a Christian, for it spells out the seriousness of the task we have all undertaken: a meditation indeed on what ‘fear’ of the Lord truly means: awe as the understandable response of anyone chosen to be a Pope or a bishop or a priest or indeed any Christian because of the impossible ministry they have undertaken. Here’s a taste from the introduction, first translated into English, or West Saxon, by no less a person than Alfred the Great and given to all English bishops to read:

‘Most dear brother, (i.e. John, the Archbishop of Ravenna) you reprove me with kind and humble regard for having wished to escape by concealment from the burdens of pastoral care. Now lest these burdens may appear light to some, I am explaining, by writing this book, how onerous I regard them, so that he who is free from them may not imprudently seek to have them, and he who has been so imprudent as to seek them may feel apprehension in having them’.

It’s a sort of ‘how to’ book, in the sense of ‘how to rule others while allowing oneself to be ruled by God’. Indeed, the one is impossible without the other. Gregory is great because God is great.

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