

St. Augustine of Canterbury

27/05/26

What is encouraging for me in the story of Saint Augustine is that he makes mistakes. - he is afraid and hesitates on his journey through France to Britain and later fails to win over the bishops of the Celtic Church in the West, remaining seated as they came to meet him. In the first instance it may well have been rumours of the ferocity of the Anglo-Saxons in the first place which dissuaded his small band from continuing and in the second simply an ignorance of local custom.

Rumours and ignorance, factors so much in play today in a secular culture subject to truth mediated through the algorithms of social media, creating a society every bit as foreign to those resisting this medium as the Anglo-Saxons were to the Romans. And the solution: not to run away but to enter into the world of the other in order to meet people where they are. Something of this I believe is being said now by Pope Leo with regard to Artificial Intelligence. The issue is not so much the technology but its abuse: its use to reinforce disparities of power.

Augustine comes in weakness and has to rely on faith (and a letter from Pope St Gregory ordering him to continue) for his mission to eventually succeed. He has to take a risk, to make a beginning. This gives the chance for others to succeed where he fails, others also taking that risk of failure, of unintended consequences of becoming too powerful even at every step. It's a fine line then between failure and success and perhaps not a judgement we can ever truly make. Is the church in England today a failure or a success? It depends on the metric and the scale; on rumour and ignorance or a man on a cross subject to no one.

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