

Mellitus: First Bishop of London

In the month when Easter falls I usually write on some aspect of Holy Week or Easter. This year I'm departing from custom in writing instead about Mellitus, the first Bishop of London, who is commemorated, as you will see from the Calendar of Common Worship, on 24 April. My particular prompt for writing about him this year was the fact that we are coming up to the anniversary of Sarah Mullaley's consecration as the first female Bishop of London, and that made me think of Mellitus as London's original 'first'. Her cathedral is, of course, St Paul's, the dedication of the London cathedral which goes back to the time of Mellitus in the early seventh century.

When Pope Gregory the Great sent a mission to convert the old Roman province of Britannia in 597, it was headed by Augustine, who established his headquarters in Canterbury, near where he first landed. Gregory intended that there should be two archbishoprics, one in London, and one in York, reflecting the importance of these two towns when Britannia was a unified Roman province – information that was still known in Rome in Gregory's day. What he did not know, however, was that sixth-century 'Britannia' (England) was no longer organised as a single entity but was made up of several small kingdoms, which of course complicated the mission enormously. An archbishopric was eventually established in York in the 730s, in the Kingdom of Northumbria (although there were bishops in the kingdom before that). But the archbishopric in the south remains to this day in Canterbury, honouring what local circumstances brought about under Augustine. Conversion of the people and the setting up of churches needed royal support. London was often contested territory between the various kingdoms in the south-east, but Canterbury was at the heart of the Kingdom of Kent, where Augustine received the necessary support to establish his mission.

As he and the monks who came with him laboured on, Augustine maintained a close correspondence with Pope Gregory, and in 601 Gregory sent reinforcements. We know the names of several in this second wave of Roman missionaries: Mellitus was one of them. In 604, the year that Augustine died, Mellitus was consecrated as the first bishop of the East Saxons, a kingdom lying just to the north of the Kingdom of Kent. There, without a fixed see, he set about extending the conversion. Later, when good progress had been made, the King of Kent, the most powerful king in the area at the time, built a church for Mellitus in London. It was dedicated to St Paul. However, when the king died in 616, Mellitus lost his protection and he and Bishop Justus of Rochester, who had also arrived in England in 601 as a member of the second wave of missionaries, withdrew to Gaul, leaving only Laurentius – a member of Augustine's original party of monks, and his successor as Archbishop – in charge of the English church. Fortunately Laurentius was able to win over the new king to Christianity, and so Mellitus and Justus returned. Justus went back to Rochester, but the Londoners refused to receive Mellitus, perhaps because they resented the interference of the King of Kent. However, the question of what should become of Mellitus was quickly resolved: Laurentius died, on 2 February 619, and Mellitus became the third Archbishop of Canterbury. He died on 24 April 624.

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