

ST THEODORE OF TARSUS AND CANTERBURY: ANTIOCHIAN STAR OF ORTHODOX BRITAIN

On 27th May in the year 669, some thirteen hundred years ago, there landed on these shores, probably only a few miles from here, one who was to become a lantern and a light for the people of Britain, and particularly for the English people. He was a foreigner from the other end of the Roman Empire, who had travelled considerably before arriving here. He had great and wide experience, already a man of 67 years. He was Theodore, who - at what we might have thought the end of his life - started a completely new ministry here in these islands in the western ocean. It was a startling new beginning - completely unanticipated, we may assume, not much more than a year before.

I wonder what the English thought as he arrived: "Fancy the Pope appointing an old man like Theodore to this challenging task of being Archbishop for the land of Britain. He'll never manage it. He'll die within a couple of years ago. A foreigner too! Why did that good Englishman the king sent to be Archbishop have to die? What a waste!" – But what a surprise any complainants were to have, for here was a man of holiness, a man of power but of humility, a man of great intellectual ability, a man of great administrative ability, a man of physical strength – and clearly a man of saintly qualities. Here in fact was one who was to alter the course of the Church of the English. Here was one who was to shape the very nature and structure of the English Nation, not just of the Church. Here was a man whose influence has continued even to this very day, thirteen hundred years later.

Perhaps I had better in parenthesis assure all good Orthodox people about the Church of the British and the English at this time. We must be clear that for the whole of the first millennium the Church in the islands was both Catholic and Orthodox. Before the Great Schism between East and West which we normally (though questionably) date to the eleventh century, to 1054 – before that date, the Church in Britain, and indeed throughout the West, was Orthodox. There was little division between East and West. For this reason, we Orthodox in this country venerate the Saints of this country as *our* Saints. The Saints of Britain and England before the Schism may indeed be regarded as Catholic or even Anglican, but they are also *our* Saints, *Orthodox* Saints. There was one Church, one Faith, one Life, one Way, even in many ways one practice, in East and West.

Theodore himself is a prime example of that conjoining of East and West. He was born in the East, at Tarsus in Asia Minor, close to "the top right-hand corner" of the Mediterranean. This was the city famous as the birthplace of St Paul centuries before. Theodore was a Greek – the Greeks had been settled round those shores for centuries and of course remained there until the twentieth century. We know nothing of his parentage. And while we have always honoured him in this country it must be said that he seems very little known, if at all, in his native Church. We in the twenty-first century Antiochian Deanery of the United Kingdom and Ireland, may also be proud that Theodore's "native Church" was in fact the Church of Antioch, Tarsus being only some hundred miles from Antioch. But even an excellent and useful booklet entitled *Harvest of Antioch*, published in recent years in the

Antiochian Archdiocese of North America, an account of the various Saints of Antioch, does not mention this fascinating Saint who linked East and West more than a millennium ago.

Thus in Theodore we have this linking together of Antioch and the British Isles which was not reproduced until the very end of the twentieth century, with the founding of the Deanery by the Holy Synod of Antioch at the request of His Beatitude Ignatius IV, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, and under the charge of His Grace Bishop Gabriel, now His Eminence the Archbishop of Western and Central Europe. This happened ten years ago, in 1995, and is part of our reason for being on pilgrimage here today. Theodore may be said to have been, like ourselves, fully a member both of the Orthodox Church of Antioch and of the Orthodox Church of Britain, even if both of those assertions need a little qualification.

Let us then look at this man of Antioch and Britain, as we also have the privilege to be. I should at this point explain that I am neither an academic nor an expert on St Theodore of Tarsus and Canterbury. I am indebted to the great labours of Michael Lapidge formerly of the University of Cambridge, and of others, who in the past twenty or thirty years have opened up the field of Anglo-Saxon studies in general, and of St Theodore in particular, and expanded our knowledge of the Saint enormously. Of course they too would acknowledge their debt to perhaps the greatest historian and theologian of the English Church of the first millennium, St Bede the Venerable. If it were not for Bede it is certain that Theodore would have disappeared completely from view, be completely unknown to us. Bede it is who writes of him and tells his basic story. In his extraordinary work *The History of the English Church and People* Bede tells of Theodore and his influence – yes, in glowing and highly respectful terms, but also with almost complete accuracy - marks, of course, of the whole of that work.

Theodore's early years

St Theodore was born in Tarsus in Cilicia in Asia Minor in the year 602 after Christ. He was a highly intelligent lad, and though Tarsus was quite a city it had at this time only primary or secondary schools. For his higher education, it seems that Theodore went off to Antioch.

The straight Roman roads stretched to the corner of the Mediterranean and then down to Antioch. In the West the Roman empire had already died 100 or 150 years before, but it had continued of course in the East, centred in Constantinople, and would flourish, to a greater or lesser degree, for another 800 years. Antioch was still a great city of the Empire, capital of the province of the Orient (which is why our Patriarch enjoys his title of “Antioch and All the Orient” or “East”).

And in Antioch there was a great university – and, for our interest, a great School of Theology, which was highly influential for centuries. Here in Antioch there had been in earlier times great theologians such as John Chrysostom, who is not only another Greek and Greek-speaker, but also another great Antiochian. (There had been great heretics around in Antioch as well, but that is also true of Constantinople!) We are accustomed to talk of *the Latin West and the Greek East*, but we should note that the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire had in fact two distinct (though not separated) parts, the Greek and the Syriac. Antioch was a bi-lingual city where these two cultures met. Here Greek-speaking Theodore must have learnt Syriac, at least as far as being able to understand it to a certain degree - it is a language close to Aramaic, the native language of Christ, and is still used by

the so-called Monophysite Syrian Orthodox Church, though not by the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch to which we belong.

Here in Antioch Theodore would have been taught the various branches of Theology – the Fathers of the Greek and Syrian East, Church history, canon law, and Holy Scripture. This last is of particular interest to us because there were at that time two particular ways that Holy Scripture was taught, corresponding to the two great Schools of Theology at Alexandria in Egypt and at Antioch in Syria. At Alexandria they liked to interpret the Scriptures by what is called *the allegorical method* – for example, when in Exodus it speaks of the coming of the sea down on the Egyptians, the Alexandrians might have said that this is the wrath of God coming down upon sinners. But at Antioch they used a more *literal method*, which in that example might have talked of the manner the water came down on them, and how it worked that the Egyptians were drowned while the Israelites escaped. Both ways of interpretation are Orthodox and valid, but the one was emphasised at Alexandria, the other at Antioch. – This, you will see later, helps us to understand Theodore and his work.

Let us return to the Saint himself. After his studies at Antioch it seems that he penetrated into the more Syriac part of the country, travelling to the city of Edessa, probably to study. There was a School of Theology here also, and though this city also was bi-lingual, it was the centre for the Syriac-speaking theologians, so it would be likely that young Theodore would indeed have spoken Syriac. In this school he would have studied the writings of the celebrated St Ephraim the Syrian.

Here we must mention the political events of the time, which had results continuing to our own day. The Persians attacked the Roman province of Syria in 613 and 614. They took Antioch, and Tarsus, Damascus and Jerusalem, where they stole the relic of the Holy Cross. What effect did that invasion have on Theodore? – No one is sure: it might be that it was at this moment that he fled, but it seems likely that he stayed on, for he was then only eleven or twelve years old, and as we have said, continued his education in Antioch and possibly Edessa. In 627 Roman Emperor Heraclius reclaimed Syria, and regained the Holy Cross. No doubt everybody in Syria, who were mostly Christians, breathed a great sigh of relief. But the easing of the situation was short-lived: by this time the Arab tribes to the south and east of Syria had been united as an extraordinary force by the new religion of Mohammed. This had empowered them, and Islam's strong missionary force had led them to conquer and convert forcefully any peoples they could. The Byzantine Empire had been left weak by its wars with the Persians, and in 637 the Arab armies seized their chance and attacked, easily taking the cities of the East including Antioch, Jerusalem and Tarsus. It was now that floods of Christian refugees escaped from Syria. Thousands migrated - to Constantinople, Greece, Italy and elsewhere.

Theodore, if he had not left before, joined in this flight for freedom. It seems that he decided to go to Constantinople, possibly via Athens. Constantinople of course was the heart of the Empire, had been for three centuries already, and would remain so for another 800 years. Here there was another School of Theology. And as it was the seat of the Imperial Court there were also many other subjects taught at a high level by first-rate teachers under Imperial and Patriarchal patronage. There were teachers of philosophy, medicine, canon

law, civil law, astronomy, calculus, etc. This is important because present-day scholars are showing us how little bits of Theodore's wide teaching later at Canterbury contain definite echoes of the teachers at Constantinople.

Theodore goes to Rome

By this time Theodore must be in his late thirties of course. Now for some reason he decides to go to the ancient imperial seat of old Rome. It is probable that already he is a monk, and it seems that he joined a new community of monks, the Monastery of St Anastasius. This community of monks from Cilicia were preserving the head of St Anastasius, recently martyred by the Persians. They had his life-story in Greek with them, and it seems likely that Theodore made a translation into Latin for a wider western audience in Rome. It was a very literal translation, in not-very-good Latin – perhaps Theodore was still only learning Latin, or perhaps he intended it to be a very literal translation so that those who could read the Greek, but not very well, could get the gist of it. That translation was later brought to England, probably by Theodore, and criticised in the next generation by Bede (who clearly did not realise its translator was probably his hero Theodore himself).

In the year 649 a Council of the Western Church took place in Rome, the Lateran Council. Along with St Maximus the Confessor Theodore seems to have taken a leading part, though a simple monk: This Council dealt with the latest heresy to afflict the Christian Church, the heresy of Monotheletism, which said that Christ was not fully human because he had only "one will", whereas Orthodoxy insists that - having two natures, of God and of Man – he must have "two wills", though united in his one Person. The Council came out clearly for the Orthodox position, and one of the signatures is of "Theodore the Monk". Years later, when Archbishop in Canterbury, he was asked by the then Pope to present the Orthodox view on that subject to the Sixth Ecumenical Council of the Church in 681 in Constantinople as the only remaining theologian from that Lateran Council thirty years before who understood the matter. Theodore however pleaded that he was by now too old to travel all the way from Britain.

Now we move to the events of 668. Deusdedit, sixth Archbishop of Canterbury, had died four years before, just after the important Council of Whitby in Yorkshire. A candidate was sent from Kent to Rome to be consecrated, but he died of the plague before consecration. The Pope then decided to make his own choice: he asked one Hadrian or Adrian, Abbot of a Monastery at Naples. St Hadrian also was a Greek, from North Africa. He refused the position, but, seemingly a powerful man, with the ear of many other powerful men, he suggested one Andrew, another Abbot, but he also refused. Hadrian then suggested a Monk he knew in Rome, and who was likely known to the Pope anyway. This was Theodore.

Theodore accepted, though by then 66 years old (as one also 66, I personally rather resent the way that Bede describes him as *of a venerable age!*). As a Greek monk he was naturally tonsured according to the then Greek form – a complete shaving of the head. But the Pope ordered that as he was going to the West he should have the western form of tonsure, so he waited four months for his hair to grow and then had the central crown cut out and shaved. Of course he must also have learnt the western forms of worship. A layman, he had to be

ordained up through the ranks of the clergy, and on 26 March 668 he was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury by the Pope. Two months later, on 27 May, he set out for England. He was accompanied at the command of the Pope by St Hadrian, and also by a young English monk who had been spending time in Rome, Benedict Biscop, yet another Saint, who went on to an influential position in the English Church. Benedict was to be Theodore's interpreter until he learnt the English tongue. They were delayed in France, but used the time wisely. He met the Bishop of Paris who had only recently come there from England, where he had been Bishop of the West Saxons, and had taken part in the Council of Whitby. And when he was sick in north-west France, no doubt he spent time discussing with the people of Little Britain, still closely connected with their cousins across the Channel, the affairs of Great Britain.

It took them a time, then, to get to England. Theodore, leaving Hadrian in France another year, arrives here in England with Benedict Biscop exactly one year after he left Rome. It is now 27 May 669, and possibly Theodore is deliberately linking his mission with that of St Augustine who had died on 26 or 27 May sixty-six years before. Doubtless he is publicly and ceremonially received by the king and clergy of Kent, and comes here to Canterbury to sit for the first time on his throne, and to claim the Christian obedience of all the English people, or even of all the British people – Bede refers to him sometimes as Archbishop of the English and sometimes as Archbishop of Britain, and as half a Scot, I wonder whether Theodore and Bede between them are the originators of the problem English people still have of distinguishing between being English and being British! - Anyway, it is clear he is laden with books, for his library at Canterbury clearly contains many valuable volumes, including much Greek theology.

Theodore in England

Now begins, says the Venerable Bede, *the happiest time of the English people since they came to Britain*. Theodore soon conducts a tour of England. The aim is always the provision of pastoral care. He rearranges the dioceses of the north into manageable units, and consecrates more bishops. He cares less for the unity of each Saxon kingdom, and more for the provision of the sacraments for the Christian people of each kingdom. With his right-hand man Hadrian (whom he has made on arrival the Abbot of the very Monastery where we are worshipping today) he organises a school at Canterbury – whether at the Cathedral site or at the Monastery site is not known, but it does mean that Kings School here at Canterbury can today claim to be the oldest school in England.

In his school he and Hadrian, also a highly learned man, educate boys and young men in the Faith, preparing them to serve the needs of the still-new Church of the English. They have a most thorough education in philosophy, the Fathers, the Scriptures, medicine, canon and civil law, church music, astronomy, mathematics, Greek, Latin, etc – all the subjects which Theodore himself had learnt, as we have seen, in Antioch, Edessa, Athens, and Constantinople. The Antiochian method of Biblical understanding is followed of course, and perhaps that influence has continued in English Biblical studies to this day, for Englishmen generally prefer the literalist approach, the Antiochian approach, over the more mystical, Alexandrian approach. Certainly in the Biblical Commentaries produced in the School here

– which was almost a university – this approach was followed, referring continually to the opinions of Theodore and Hadrian.

These early days of Christianity among the English were heady days indeed, producing very many Saints, and giving first-rate intellectual and spiritual training. *The minds of all men*, says Bede, *were bent upon the joys of the heavenly kingdom of which they had but lately heard*. And of our two Greek Saints in this foreign land, it has been said, *Theodore was the sun, Adrian the moon of the Church in Britain*.

One other aspect of Theodore's effect on the Church in England was his institution of synods of the Bishops. He is famous for two in particular. He called the first synod on 24 September 673 at Hertford. The Bishops agreed a whole number of canons, which laid down certain ways for them to act. Most of his proposals, based on earlier Church councils, were accepted unanimously – on the date of Easter, on the independence of Monasteries, on monks staying at home, on clergy staying in their diocese and bishops not interfering in other dioceses, on the question of divorce, allowed for fornication (the eastern approach, interestingly enough), and so on. On the question of the division of dioceses there was disagreement for the moment, and it was decided to hold synods annually rather than twice-annually.

The other great synod was held at Hatfield (probably the one in Yorkshire) on 17 September 679 or 680. This was a meeting on doctrine. The synod agreed - in splendid phrases such as those used in any of the pronouncements of other Church councils - that it held the universal Catholic Faith. I must admit that there is here a slight embarrassment for us Orthodox, as the text appears to teach what we call the double procession of the Holy Spirit - that the Spirit *proceeds from the Father and the Son*. However, there are three comments on this that we should make: (a) a claim was made by a scholar in the 16th century that the word *filioque* in the manuscript was a later addition; (b) even if *filioque* was definitely included, the words should be interpreted to mean that the Spirit proceeded from the Father *through* the Son as with similar wording by St Maximus the Confessor, whom St Theodore certainly knew in Rome; and (c) no indication is given that the words *and the Son, filioque*, were actually added into the text of the Nicene Creed in England at this time.

Theodore was a man of many abilities. He must have been physically very strong: Bede says that Theodore *himself with his own hands, lifted* the humble Bishop Chad *on horseback*, ordering him to ride on long journeys round his diocese. He could be firm indeed, deposing more than one Bishop when necessary, but was also gentle and forgiving. He could apologise when he made a wrong move, as when he accepted that Wilfred should still be Bishop of York. He could bring peace between kings of warring states, as when he brought lasting peace between Egrid of Northumbria and Ethelred of Mercia. He was a great teacher, administrator, scholar, canonist - and Saint, though interestingly we do not seem to hear of miracles in his lifetime or after his death. His effect on English life survived not only the great Schism of the 11th century, but also the disintegration of western Christianity in the 16th century. He was the first to bring together all the English peoples. Before this they were divided into various kingdoms – often warring ones: by his influence on the Church and on kings Theodore laid the foundations of one united English kingdom.

In the year 690, Theodore died, aged 88, warned in a dream some time before of his death at that age. He was buried, as we have witnessed today, in the Monastery which St Augustine had founded ninety years before, and of which his great friend and colleague St Hadrian was still Abbot.

Theodore and his future

Antiochians may be proud indeed of this Greek from the Church of Antioch who so formed the then-Orthodox Church of these our beloved islands that he has been venerated here ever since. I venture to suggest four objectives we could set ourselves in this anniversary year of grace and thanksgiving:

- 1 Let us make the Antiochian Greek Orthodox Deanery in our country more conscious of St Theodore and his contribution to English ecclesiastical and secular life;
- 2 Let us try to open up *all* the Orthodox Churches represented in this country to a greater awareness of him;
- 3 Let us awaken our own Antiochian Church in Lebanon and Syria, and indeed in all the countries around the world where she is represented, to this great son of hers;
- 4 Let us encourage the production of popular literature, and the painting of more icons, in order to pursue these objectives – some of this may be done in conjunction with non-Orthodox friends who honour St Theodore, but it must be remembered that Orthodox attitudes to the Saints are in some ways subtly different from those of both Roman Catholics and Anglicans.

The 19th century Anglican Bishop Stubbs wrote, *It is difficult if not impossible to overstate the debt which England, Europe, and Christian civilisation owe to the work of Theodore* - though it may be that he was identifying *Christian civilisation* rather too closely with British imperialism. Certainly we may agree with Donald Attwater, the Roman Catholic writer on Saints, that *St Theodore found the Church in England an unorganised missionary body; he left it a fully ordered province of the universal church.*

But let us leave the last word with that wonderful English Father of the Orthodox Church the Venerable Bede, ardent admirer of Theodore with good reason, who, as a boy at Monkwearmouth or Jarrow, had almost certainly met Theodore. St Bede wrote:

Of him, as well of his companions of the same degree, it may rightly and truly be said that their bodies are interred in peace, and their names shall live from generation to generation. For to say all in a few words, the English churches received more advantage during the time of his pontificate than they had done ever before. His person, life, age, and death, are plainly described to all that resort thither, by the epitaph on his tomb....:

*Here rests fam'd Theodore, a Grecian name,
Who had o'er England an archbishop's claim;
Happy and blessed, industriously he wrought,
And wholesome precepts to his scholars taught...*

*And now it was September's nineteenth day,
When bursting from its ligaments of clay,
His spirit rose to its eternal rest,
And joined in heaven the chorus of the blest.*

In several senses, St Theodore of Tarsus and Canterbury was indeed the *Antiochian Star of Orthodox Britain*.

**St Theodore, great son of Antioch,
noble and loving Bishop and Pastor of the English people,
pray to God for us!**

Fr Alexander Haig
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This talk was originally given at the Antiochian Orthodox Pilgrimage to Canterbury in St Theodore's honour on 25 June 2005.

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Feast of St Theodore of Tarsus and Canterbury
for the Orthodox Pilgrimage to Minster Abbey, Minster-in-Thamet.

St Theodore signed the charter of Minster Abbey for St Domneva (Ermenburga) in 670, and later tonsured St Mildred, second Abbess.

<p>St Theodore is in many respects becoming more appreciated in these days. Much is being discovered about him. A great deal of work has been done by MICHAEL LAPIDGE, published in his book on St Theodore (Cambridge University Press), to which this talk is much indebted.</p>
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