

Today the Church commemorates St Gregory the Great, described by St Bede, the first great historian of the Church of England as “our apostle”, because he was the Pope who sent St Augustine of Canterbury in 597 on his mission to establish a church for the English people. It’s not without reason then that Gregory is sometimes described a “the apostle of England.”

Gregory came from a noble and wealthy Roman family which had been distinguished in both politics and the Church. One of his great-grandfathers had himself been Pope, and his father had been a senator and senior official of the city. Gregory seemed destined for an important public role. As an expert lawyer, he also became Prefect of the city. His real longing however was to be a monk. Even that did not save him from public service as the Pope sent him as an ambassador to Constantinople, which was then the capital of the Roman Empire. Like many of the most able and devout leaders of the early Church, Gregory was thus torn between a prominent public position, with all the temptations that brings, and his desire for a hidden life devoted to the service of Christ.

This same ambivalence characterised the way he exercised his own ministry when he himself was chosen as Pope. He brought with him all the experience and habits he had acquired as a senior servant of the state. He was decisive and could be authoritarian. But he was also a sensitive and skilful pastor not just in his care for the Church as whole but also in his attentive care for the different needs of the people entrusted to his care. One of his loveliest writings was a book “On Pastoral Care” - while Archbishop Michael Ramsey said he used to reread every time he was preparing to ordain a new bishop.

So, that’s a bit of the background and character of the saint we commemorate today

His title, “the Great”, should not mislead us. Whoever would be great, said Jesus, must make himself least and the servant of all. One of my favourite 20<sup>th</sup> century saints, Charles de Foucauld, said that Jesus has so taken the lowest place that no one can take it from him” - and all who follow him must follow him in this too. Gregory understood this, and one of his favourite descriptions of himself was “the servant of the servants of God.”

Greatness, Christian greatness, is something very different from how the world understands greatness. Do you remember the little battle between Jesus and Peter we heard about in Sunday’s gospel? Peter had protested when Jesus spoke about his coming suffering. This shall never happen to you, Lord. Peter clearly thought that Jesus should trounce all his enemies and meant to do everything in his power to help him do so. Peter wanted a triumphant Jesus, a glorious Jesus - in this he probably was not too far from those two brothers James and John who asked to have places of honour in God’s kingdom.

Jesus’ whole life and message was a protest against that way of thinking. In worldly terms Jesus was, to quote a modern phrase, a loser, the ultimate loser. Hence his sharp words to Peter: “the way you think is not God’s way but man’s.” The world’s way is to lord it over others or at least find ourselves higher in the pecking order and have other people at our beck and call. Christ’s way is very different. After all, he came, as he himself said, not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

May St Gregory pray for us individually and as the Church of England, that we may all learn how to share the lowest place with Jesus Christ and, following his example, wash the feet of our brothers and sisters.