

Augustine of Canterbury

First Archbishop of Canterbury, died May 26, 605 AD

Today we remember Augustine, the first archbishop of Canterbury. In the year 596, he had an important job in a monastery in Rome. He would have been quite happy to remain in that position, but Pope Gregory the Great chose him to lead a mission to the Anglo-Saxons of England. The Pope asked Augustine to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity and to organize a system of churches in England.



Augustine traveled to England with 40 monks, and landed on the coast of the kingdom of Kent in the spring of 597. The local king had married a Christian wife from France, and she convinced him to let the missionaries enter the town of Canterbury and occupy a small, broken-down church, abandoned by British Christians when they fled from the invading Anglo-Saxons. Also because of his wife's influence, the pagan king allowed the Roman missionaries to preach the gospel without any hinderance.

Augustine was a reluctant missionary. He doubted his ability and feared that if he tried to convert the people of Kent forcefully, they would reject him. Instead of proclaiming the

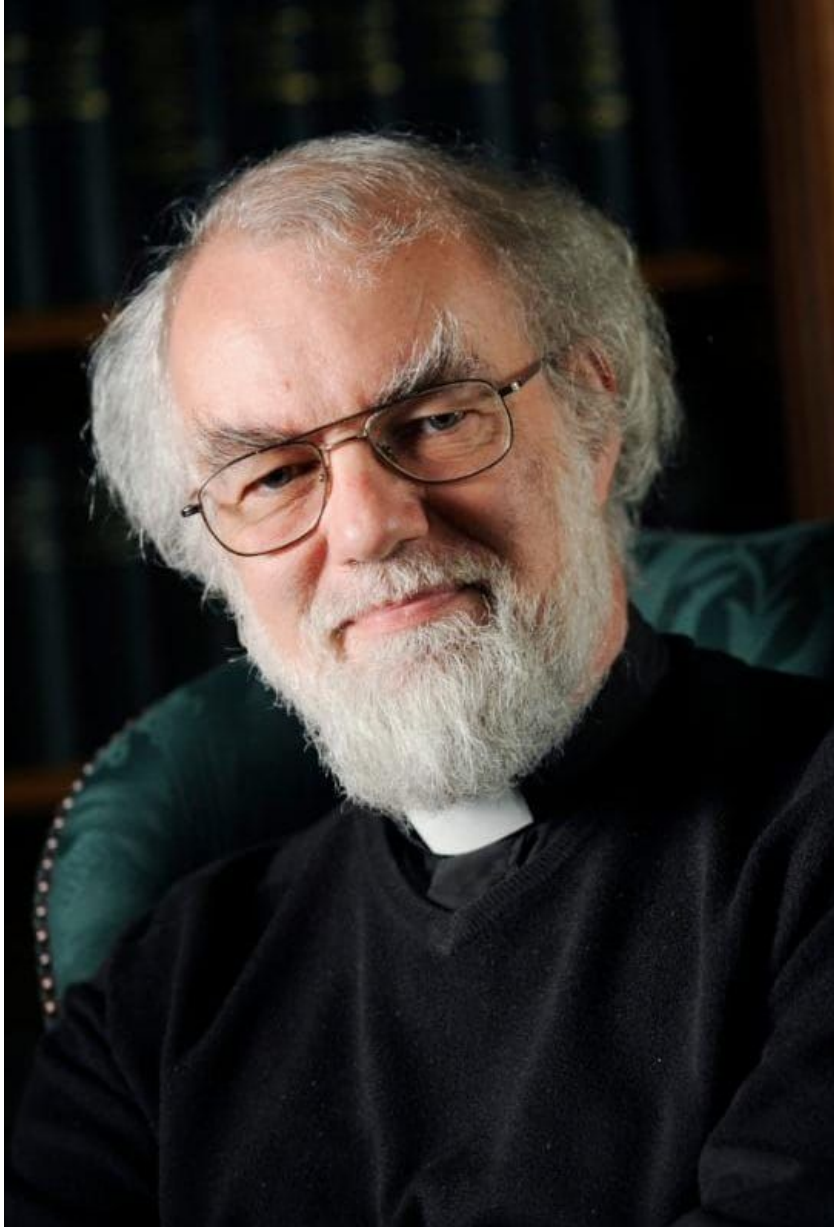
gospel aggressively and in public as Pope Gregory had ordered him to, Augustine and the monks decided to become a normal part of life in the kingdom of Kent. They held liturgical church services just like they would have if they were still in Rome — wearing their church robes, reading scripture, praying, and celebrating the Eucharist. They didn't go knocking on doors or standing on street corners. They simply attended to the worship of Jesus, and left the doors wide open. Any of the Anglo-Saxons who wished to join them were welcome, but Augustine and the monks did not go looking for converts.

This strategy worked. The people of Canterbury grew curious and started to wander in. And within four years, the king of Kent was baptized, and he ordered his whole kingdom to give up their pagan practices and follow Augustine's teaching instead. Though Augustine actually disobeyed the Pope's orders, Pope Gregory could see that Augustine had acted wisely and appointed him Archbishop of Canterbury. By the time he died, on May 26, 605, the foundations of the English church were firmly laid. And so also were the foundations of the church in Canterbury! The present-day Canterbury Cathedral still stands in the same spot, and continues to be the most important place in the entire Anglican world.

(Adapted from For All the Saints, 174.)

Rowan Williams

104th Archbishop of Canterbury (2002-2012)



Justin Welby

105th Archbishop of Canterbury (2012 to present)

