

## Art reflection for St Aidan 31<sup>st</sup> August and St Gregory the Great of Rome (c 540-604) 3<sup>rd</sup> September

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Aidan (or Aedan) was born in Ireland, probably around 590, and was part of the Iona community. In 635 he was called to Northumbria by Oswald, the local ruler (whose day we celebrated on 5<sup>th</sup> August) to be an evangelist to his people. His work was centered in the northern part of the Kingdom of Bernicia and Oswald gave him the island of Lindisfarne, close to his own capital of Bamburgh, as the seat of his diocese. His mission was to the Anglo-Saxons, who had reverted to paganism after the collapse of the Roman empire. Most of our knowledge of Aidan comes from Bede, whose *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* praises him and his work in the highest terms. Bede explains that Aidan travelled around on foot, demonstrating by his own giving, care and austerity that he lived what he preached. He appealed to both rich and poor, liberating slaves and educating them, and setting up churches and monasteries to carry on the work. Oswald's successor Oswin also supported Aidan under increasingly difficult conditions as the area was attacked by the Mercians. Bede also noted Aidan's intense prayer life and love of study. His only real criticism is that Aidan supported the Irish way of calculating Easter, rather than the Roman. After his death in 651 he was buried on Lindisfarne, but his bones were later taken to the church at Bamburgh which is dedicated to him. The current building is on the site of his church, but was built from around 1200.



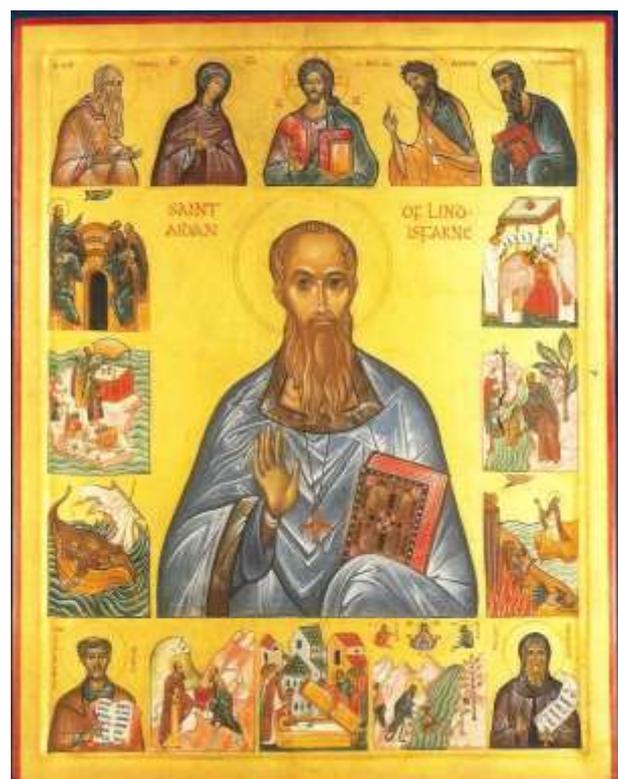
The Priory on Lindisfarne (below) is on the site of Aidan's foundation, but was also built around 1200.



The Lindisfarne Gospels, which were written and illuminated c 715-720 in the monastery are an astonishing example of the use of Anglo-Saxon art in the service of the Christian faith. Below, the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew.



St Aidan is also honoured in Orthodox churches. In icons he is usually shown holding a Bible, as in this anonymous example. Here he is surrounded by examples of his journeying, preaching, help for the poor and baptizing.



A 1778 ceiling painting by Andreas Meinrad von Ow in the Church of St Oswald, Bad Schussenried, Germany depicts King Oswald translating the sermon of Aidan – who is gesturing eloquently, and wearing his mitre - into the Anglo-Saxon language, which Aidan originally could not speak.



### **St Gregory the Great of Rome (c 540-604) 3<sup>rd</sup> September**

Gregory was also involved with the evangelization of the British Isles. Born into a wealthy Roman family, in his 30s he sold off all his property and entered a monastery. However he was called by successive Popes to become first a deacon, and then an ambassador in Byzantium. His attempt to return to monastic life was frustrated when, during one of the outbreaks of plague which contributed to the collapse of the Roman Empire, he was elected Pope. He was faced with multiple crises – invasion by the Lombards, desperate poverty and the need for mission.

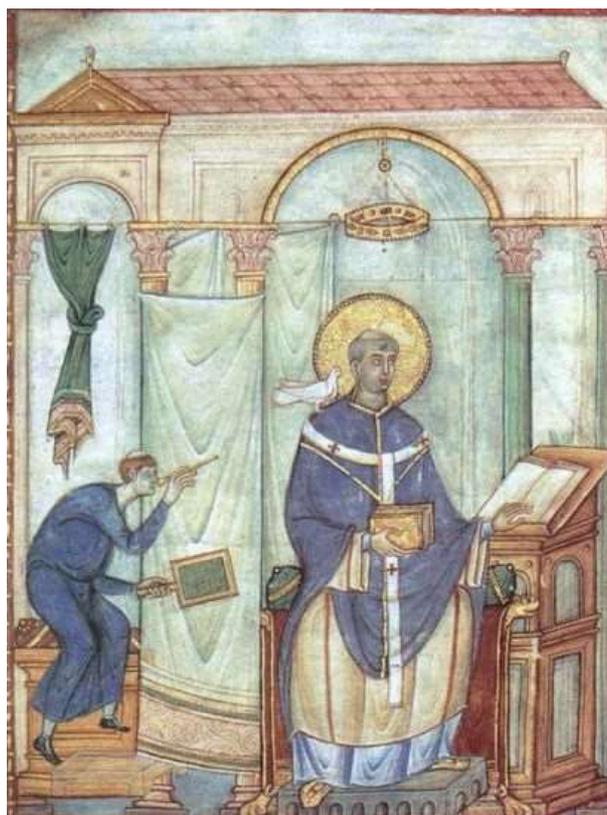
After seeing Anglo-Saxon slaves in the Roman market he had hoped to become a missionary there himself, but as Pope he sent a group of monks, headed by Augustine (of Canterbury), a monk from his own community. He continued to take a strong interest in this work, giving Augustine advice, smoothing the way with the rulers, and sending further missionaries. Hence the earliest accounts of his life were written in England, one writer lauding him as “he from whom we have received the Christian faith, he who will present the English people to the Lord on the Day of Judgement as their teacher and apostle.”

Gregory wrote voluminously with an orientation toward new converts, and his books were extremely influential well into the 12<sup>th</sup> c. We also have 854 of his letters, giving great insight into the breadth of his concerns and his desire to be “the servant of the servants of God”, a phrase he invented. He was also highly active in liturgical development, including standardizing plainchant (hence it is often referred to as “Gregorian chant”).

Gregory's often quoted comment on seeing the young slaves "Non angli sed angeli" (Not Anglo-Saxons but angels") is memorialized in a 19<sup>th</sup> c mosaic in Westminster Abbey in a chapel dedicated to SS Gregory and Augustine.



Here is a 10<sup>th</sup> c frontispiece to a copy of Gregory's letter. He is almost always shown, as here, robed, with a book, and with the dove representing the Holy Spirit descending or perching on his right shoulder.



In an 8<sup>th</sup> c Life of Gregory a story, later elaborated in the Golden Legend, describes how, when he was confronted by a person doubting the Real Presence in the eucharistic elements, they miraculously assumed the visible appearance of the body of Christ. This scene was enormously popular in art for hundreds of years, with more or less detail and realism according to the period and the artist, incidentally providing us with a great wealth of information about liturgical practices, settings and robes.

One of the most amazing is the image created in feathers by skilled Aztec workers as a gift for the then Pope, Paul 111. In 1537 he had declared that the Amerindians were human beings with souls, not, as some had claimed, sub human. In 1539, the Nahuatl noble and governor of Mexico City, Diego de Alvarado Huanitzin (nephew and son-in-law to Moctezuma II, the last Aztec ruler before Spanish colonial rule began in 1521, commissioned this work to be sent to Rome.



The Mass of St. Gregory, 1539, feathers on wood with touches of paint, 26-1/4 x 22 inches / 68 x 56 cm (Musee des Jacobins)