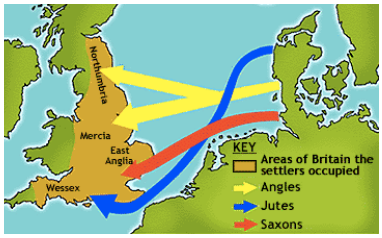
Christ Church Parish
We are a welcoming Episcopal parish renewing its people as disciples of Jesus Christ through worship, formation, and service

Adult Formation 2022
A Trip to the Wellspring of Anglican Spirituality: Canterbury, England
June 13, 2022

The earliest archeological evidence of the Christian faith in England dates to the mid-300s when a small Roman villa in Lullingstone (southwest of London) became a house church. Archeologists have discovered Christian symbols painted on the walls - a **Ch**i **R**ho or XP, the first two letters in the word **Chr**ist - and the Greek letters **A** and **W** (alpha and omega), meaning the Beginning and the End, a reference to Revelation 22:13 [left: the Lullingstone Christian image]. Paintings of six people, with arms raised in peace, were also discovered in the house church: perhaps in imitation of the early Christian *orans*, usually a feminine figure with arms lifted slightly in thanksgiving or supplication.

The Venerable Bede, an English monk of the 8th century, reports in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731 AD) the martyrdom of a soldier named Alban who refused to renounce his faith in the "true and living God who created all things." He was tortured and beheaded upon the order of an imperial Roman military judge. At the place of his death now stands St. Alban's Cathedral in a distant northwestern suburb of London. The date of Alban's martyrdom is not secure: was it in 209, 251, or 304? And did Alban actually exist? No one knows for sure. Nonetheless, he is heralded as the protomartyr of English Christianity and the patron saint of converts and victims of torture. His feast day is June 22.

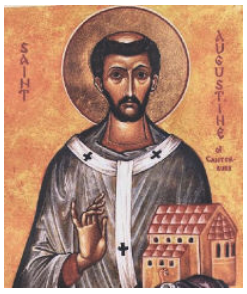
In 240, the Egyptian biblical scholar, Origen of Alexandria, wrote that he was aware of Christians in Britain, repeating the claim made in 200 by another North African theologian, Tertullian, concerning the presence of a small number of Christian communities in Roman Britain. How did the Christian faith arrive in what had become a Roman colony? Scholarly speculation suggests that traders or army retainers who followed the Roman conquest of Britain beginning in the late 1st century may have introduced the Christian faith to the island colony. What we do know for certain is this: that by the early 4th c., there were a number of Christian parishes in Britain. In 314, the bishops of York, London, and Colchester attended the Council of Arles in France. In 358, a number of English bishops attended the Council of Rimini in Italy but - they were so poor, they had to ask other bishops for financial assistance in order to return to their native land. Their poverty would be a sign of the small number of Christians in England and the vitality of Christian communities.



While there is evidence of Romano-British Christians in the 4th c. (keep in mind that the Emperor Constantine legalized all religions in 313 and the Emperor Theodosius established Christianity as the state religion in 380), all this changed with the departure of the Roman army from Britain beginning in 383. As the Romans departed, the Angles, Saxons ("Anglo-Saxon"), and Jutes invaded, landing on England's eastern coast from what we know today as Denmark and the Netherlands. Christian presence in the east was violently suppressed and replaced with Germanic polytheism. The native population was either absorbed into the culture of the invaders or fled to the west and settled in the mountains of Wales where a weakened form of Christian practice continued. In much of Britain, the Christian faith became virtually extinct under the impress of invasion and the invaders imposition of their particular form of religion on the indigenous population. What we know today as Wessex, Essex, and Sussex are derivations of West Saxon, East Saxon, and South Saxon: regions controlled by the invaders.

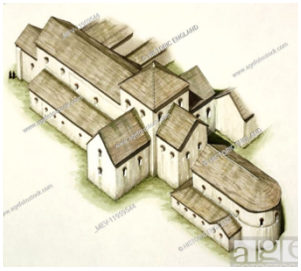
The monastic venture in Britain

In 590, an Italian Benedictine monk, Gregory, was elected bishop of Rome. In the history of the papacy, Gregory stands out as one of the most engaged and enterprising popes: he faced Gothic invaders, a disastrous period of climate change in which he worked tirelessly to ensure that the people of Rome and the surrounding region were fed in the midst of famine, and the long-term effects of the bubonic plague that drastically reduced the number of clergy able to offer pastoral care. He was also the author of the only extant life of Benedict, founder of western monasticism and writer of the *Rule* that would come to guide monastic and Christian sending missionaries to plant the seed of Christian faith in cultural soils outside the Empire.



In 596, Gregory asked Augustine [left image], a monk of his own monastic community in Rome, to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Angles and Saxons of "Anglia" (*Angles-land*, *Aengland*, thus England). No great enthusiast for travel, Augustine nonetheless ventured forth with 40 companions, a good number of them Benedictine monks. In 597, they arrived in southeastern England, in the region called Kent. Upon their arrival, they met the regional ruler, AEthelbert, and his wife, Bertha, a Christian born in Paris. AEthelbert's capital was Canterbury (from *Cantwareburh,* meaning "stronghold of the Cents" or "Kents," and Latin *Cantiacorum*). Historians suggest that Bertha's influence with her husband prompted him to offer land to Augustine and his company of monks as well as freedom for Christian worship in a region that had been marked by Germanic polytheism. Augustine of Canterbury's feast day is May 26.

It was in Canterbury that Augustine built a church and the first Benedictine abbey in Britain, the abbey named St. Augustine's after the missionary monk's death. The abbey was probably founded in 598 and consisted of an inner precinct containing the abbey's main buildings and

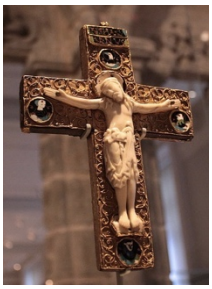


cemetery, and an outer precinct containing vineyards, orchards and gardens. Building of the main church, dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul, started almost immediately. A second, smaller church was constructed to the east of the site and dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

Within one hundred years, Augustine's work to plant the seed of Christian faith and life in the cultural soil of England began to bear fruit. At the center of this project was the Benedictine abbey in Canterbury. The life of the abbey and the people who worshipped and worked with the monks was guided by the Rule St. Benedict had completed between 530 and 547, the year of his death. The Rule set forth a number of expectations that would shape Benedictine and English Christian life. These included:

- The praying of the Psalms and reading from the Bible each day: *ora* or common prayer
- The work of artisans to provide all that was needed for worship and for work
- Manual labor to secure food, drink, shelter, and clothing: *labora* or common work
- Benedict's insistence on the primacy of care for the sick, the poor, children, pilgrims

Keep in mind the estimate that only 6% of the population were literate, capable of reading and writing. In order to pray a number of psalms each day and to serve as a lector at one of the seven hours of common prayer, one needed to be literate. Thus, the abbey became a center of **literacy**, first for monks, then nuns, and then in the establishment of a school for children. As monastic communities sprang up throughout England, monastic *scriptoria* were established in which monks and nuns copied books - that is, *all known knowledge of the day* - to be shared with other monastic communities. As we know, many of these books, especially the Bible, were illuminated by monastic artists, becoming usable works of art in the church's liturgy. What does this suggest? Monastic communities became centers in which the **love of learning** was nourished. There was no anti-intellectualism here. Indeed, once one could read the Bible, one could read *everything* available, whether Greek texts on medicine, Roman texts on architecture, or Syrian books of Christian poetry.



The monastic schedule included seven times for common prayer that followed the rising and setting of the sun. To morning, mid-day, and evening prayer, we find laypeople joining the monks or the nuns in their monastic churches. And, then, the Holy Eucharist was celebrated daily in monastic communities. It was their sense that **beauty** was a gift of God - first seen in the natural world and then through the work of artists - which prompted Benedictine communities in England to produce **works of art** for worship: plates and chalices, baptismal fonts, altars, gospel books, candle work, vestments, crosses, crucifixes, illuminated prayer books, paintings, and murals. [left: crucifix, 900 AD, Hyde Abbey, Winchester]. To say the least, the visual and musical arts were nurtured in the monastic heart of English spirituality. In time, worship at the major liturgical feasts of the year was accompanied by simple and then more elaborate plays, the beginning of **dramatic productions** in western Christianity. Here we find no sterile, white-washed spaces devoid of image and art. Rather we find monastic artisans offering their skill for the enrichment of the people's worship.

St. Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury included vineyards, orchards, and gardens. This should come as no surprise when one reads in the *Rule* that "the monastery should be so established that all the necessary things, such as water, mill, garden, and various workshops may be within the enclosure" (RB 66). Keep in mind that there was no Loew's, no Costco, no Rite Aid, and no medical clinic down the street from English abbeys. St. Benedict wanted the monastic community to be *self-sufficient*. This meant that the monastery needed to build **shelter,** and produce **food, drink, clothing**, and **medicine**. Monasteries were marked by physical labor: stonework, thatching, and plumbing for housing; vegetable and medicinal herb and flower gardens as well as orchards for a largely vegetarian diet and for medicine; vineyards were cultivated to produce the wine needed for the Holy Eucharist and for daily consumption.

But the garden also served a spiritual purpose. This should not surprise us as gardens are prominent in the Bible: the garden of Eden, of Naboth, of two lovers in the Song of Songs, of Gethsemane, and of the garden tomb where Jesus was raised to new life. The monastic garden was often called **Paradisus** or **Paradise**: a place in which all things live and grow in harmony; a place devoted to peace; a space for prayer or meditation; a foretaste on earth of the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven in which the Tree of Life, set next to a flowing river of fresh water, holds leaves filled with healing. Indeed, monks and nuns were often referred to, in metaphor, as trees or plants: "Happy are those whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on this law, they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither" (Psalm 1:1-3). It was the monastic garden that gave birth to thousands of gardens and to the **parish garden** whose flowers, greens, and leaves were and are used to adorn the parish church.

What we witness here is a **love for the God's creation**, reverently cared for by gardeners. It should come as no surprise to us, then, that care for the garden oriented monastic communities to sustainable stewardship of their land and water sources. As sacramental Christians, early English monastics recognized that God reveals God's self through the ordinary things of this earth: through the body of Jesus and thus through human bodies; through water and olive oil; through bread and wine; through beeswax and light; through the diversity of creation itself; through ordinary words written on a page; and through dreams, thoughts, and visions.

And yet the Benedictines who found their home in St. Augustine's Abbey did not live in a fantasy land devoid of suffering. St. Benedict makes clear in his Rule that one of the most important works of the community is **attentive care for those who are sick**: "Before all things and above all things, care must be taken of the sick, so that they will be served as if they were Christ in person; for he himself said, 'I was sick, and you visited me,' and, 'What you did for one of these least ones, you did for me'" (RB 36). In a world that had *no* hospitals or clinics - each monastery established an **infirmary** with an infirmarian who served as the pharmacologist.

Thus, at St. Augustine's, the reconstructed floor plan of the abbey reveals an infirmary, an infirmary kitchen, and an infirmary chapel. Again, the Rule indicates that those who are sick

should be cared for in a separate room, wing, or building of the monastery, and should receive dietary and medical care from those trained for this service. Such care for the sick was not limited to members of the monastic community but rather open to anyone in need. Thus, we find monastic floor plans that include an entire building designated " hospital for the poor." Indeed, it was literate monks and nuns - students of Greek and Roman medical texts - who served as the primary healthcare workers in early medieval England. Consequently, English **monastic healthcare was holistic**: offering care for the spiritual and the physical needs of community members, and so continuing the healing work of Jesus of Nazareth.

Monastic influence in Anglican spirituality

How, then, did monastic life imprint itself on the DNA of English and thus Anglican spirituality? Keep in mind that the first English parishes were *monastic* parishes.

The center of Anglican spirituality is the **Holy Eucharist**, the **Daily Office**, and **Personal Prayer**. The Daily Office or Daily Prayer at the rising, zenith, and setting of sun is a distinctive dimension of this "school" of spirituality. Whether in Canterbury or Tacoma, the Daily Office or portions of the Daily Office are prayed in common (thus *common* prayer) or by individuals. The Rule also recommends Personal Prayer and spiritual reading, what has become *Lectio Divina*, meditation on a biblical text of the Daily Lectionary. These are monastic practices intended to cultivate a maturing spiritual presence within a community of Christians. One of my most precious possessions is my father's well-worn book that holds the New Testament and the Psalms. Why these two? The Psalms are central to Daily Prayer, poetic texts in which no human experience is censored. Thus, Anglican spirituality prizes the work of **poets**. The New Testament presents us with the gospels: the birth, public life, death, and resurrection of Jesus - the *lens* through which we interpret the Bible and the model for Christian life. It should come as no surprise that Anglican spirituality welcomes the work of **novelists** and **playwrights**.

Unlike some forms of Christian life that ignore the visual and musical arts, Anglican spirituality embraces and cultivates the work of **artists** and **musicians**. Indeed, the Book of Common Prayer includes collects focused solely on these ministries. The God who brought the world into existence through the big bang and the development of species is praised in the Scriptures as the artist and architect of the universe: the great Creator has endowed humans with creative powers and given them artistic inspiration in the remarkable diversity of the natural world and musical inspiration in the many sounds alive in the creation. Walk into any English and North American cathedral and many parish churches: one will find the visual and musical arts alive. Consider, for a moment, our own parishes [left above: Christ Church Parish interior, Tacoma].

One of my mentors in Anglican spirituality once said that we take special care with **parish gardens** in a way other Christian communities don't. We tend to and often fuss over trees, bushes, and flowers that reflect the local environment and its climate. No wonder we have celebrated **Rogation Days** during the Easter season in the past (and hopefully next year) with a procession into the parish garden, the blessing of the garden, and the offering of blessed soil

for our own gardens. It's as if we are creating our own **Paradisus**, a place dedicated to peace in an increasingly violent world; a place dedicated to prayer, meditation, or conversation; a place dedicated to natural beauty: a mirror of God's own beauty.

The 9th century Benedictine abbot, Wilfrid, in his *Book on the Cultivation of Gardens*, wrote this: "Whatever property one is given does not refuse to bring forth native produce if only your care is not hindered *by heavy lethargy* … You must not decline to *blacken your hands* calloused by a hard hoe nor refuse to *spread dung* from full baskets on the dry dust."

But there is more: in a time of global warming, pollution, and degradation of land and water, Anglican spirituality rightly *resists* such harm to God's good earth. The parish garden and our own gardens, be they small or large, can serve as a form of resistance to such damage and an alternative to it: a steadfast reminder that we are called, as the Prayer Book says, to **conserve earth's treasures** for future generations. This, too, is a gift from our monastic forebears.

And, finally, St. Augustine's Abbey - with its infirmary - instilled in Anglican spirituality the work of Jesus the healer by making **care for the sick, homebound,** and **dying** primary, not an afterthought. We recognize this first in **the Prayers** of the Holy Eucharist in which we announce the names of those who have requested our intercession: praying for those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit. We continue the healing work of Jesus by offering the **sacrament of healing** as directed in the letter to James: "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord" (5:14). We send **eucharistic visitors** to bring Holy Communion to those unable to join the assembly in worship. Some parishes now employ a **parish nurse** who serves the members and friends of the parish with basic nursing care. The Episcopal Church sponsors **hospitals** and counts **religious orders** whose primary mission is to serve the sick, homebound, and the dying.

As a form of Christian faith and life that welcomes **medical expertise**, we see medical and pharmaceutical researchers, physicians, P.A.s, nurses, physical therapists, EMS workers, counselors, psychiatrists, and social workers as instruments through which God brings healing to those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit. Unlike those in our nation skeptical of scientific expertise - whether such expertise concerns pandemics, climate change, or biblical interpretation - we view reason and its ability to enlighten and serve life as **a gift of God**. I think our monastic forebears would be delighted by our ability to alleviate human suffering and guide people to healing and health. After all, one of the earliest biblical understandings of the term *salvation* is this: "the bestowal of life, health, and wholeness."

Our sojourn at St. Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury is intended to help us recognize that Anglican spirituality did not begin in the 18th century with the establishment of the Episcopal Church in this country, nor in the 16th century with establishment of the Church *of* England (rather than the Roman church *in* England), but rather with the evangelization of the English people by monastic missionaries in the 6th century, over 1400 years ago.

Questions
1. What, if anything, struck you in reading about monastic influence in Anglican spirituality?
2. Do you have a question for Augustine of Canterbury? If so, what is it?
3. To which aspect of monastic life as discussed in the handout are you most attracted?
4. What question does the reading raise for you?

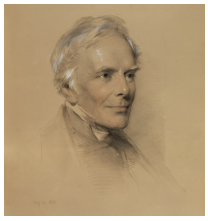
Video tours and websites
The story of St. Augustine's Abbey
https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/st-augustines-abbey/history-and-stories/history/

Canterbury Cathedral and Precincts Tour
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tE2s7QX8ZpQ&t=50s

An Hour of Song with the Boy Choristers of Canterbury Cathedral
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6v4knLfS7M

Learning and education in early medieval England
https://www.bl.uk/anglo-saxons/articles/learning-and-education-in-anglo-saxon-england

NEXT WEEK, **Monday, June 20**


We'll travel to **Salisbury**, what the Romans called **Sarum**, and meet **Osmund**, a Norman nobleman and bishop of the diocese whose primary work focused on establishing a distinctive form of English worship. But watch out! We'll jump to 19th century and visit **Oxford University** and meet **John Keble**, the leader of a reform movement whose influence on Anglican spirituality continues to this day.