

St. Gregory, Apostle of the English

IT WAS GOD WHO GAVE US THE COURAGE TO PROCLAIM HIS GOOD NEWS. Recently, I met a middle-aged couple from Blackpool, Catholics who engage in street-mission work. They'd just spent their Saturday morning in Morrison's car park, offering to help shoppers carry their bags to the car. As they did this, they'd reveal they were Catholics. I asked them how they got on. After all, isn't modern Britain religiously a desert? Don't people get scared when you talk religion? Surely, they run a mile at the mention of the Catholic Church? No, they said: it's the opposite! True, many shoppers would brush them off, but others were fascinated; some asked for prayers; one family, wanting to know more, invited them out to a meal. Our culture, the couple said, may look like rocky ground, but spiritually, under the surface, there's a lot going on.

YOU ARE PETER AND ON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH. Today we welcome the Knights and Dames of St. Gregory and the Knights and Dames of the Holy Sepulchre, all from our Portsmouth Diocese. I hope that in celebrating Mass in honour of St. Gregory, we won't have a holy war between these rival troops! But St. Gregory, one of the greatest popes ever, should unite us all, for he is known as the Apostle of the English. It was he who sent from Rome St. Augustine, and 30 other monks, to evangelise the English. It was not an easy assignment and en route, some of them began to lose heart: the British weather would be awful, the people uncouth, and their language intolerable. Little changes! But they persisted with their mission, and after landing in Kent, were surprised at the warm welcome from King Ethelbert, who soon became a Catholic. He even gave them a house to live in, and not long after, they converted most of the South of England.

PROCLAIM THE WONDERS OF THE LORD AMONG ALL THE PEOPLES said the Psalm. God wants everyone to be saved, to find the truth, to reach happiness, to have eternal life in Jesus Christ and his Church. At this time of the year, we're asked to pray for the evangelisation of England, an intention we traditionally place in prayer before the Blessed Virgin. These days the conversion of England might seem further away than ever. Our land is now full of vast throngs of people of good will, but unchurched, people who in some way believe but who do not belong. They rarely express their faith in God, rarely hear the Word of the Lord, rarely receive the sacraments of eternal life.

Yet beneath the surface, there's a lot going on, more than meets the eye. For the Holy Spirit is at work in every human heart, wooing people towards Christ and his Church. That's why, even if at times it seems we are flogging a dead horse or hitting a brick wall, we should never give up witnessing to our faith, speaking of God and seeking to communicate the truth of Christ.

So I'd like to end with a proposal: first of all that we pray for ourselves. Each one of us is called to be an apostle, a missionary, one sent to announce the good news. But maybe we need to change our attitude? Take coming to Mass. Don't think: What's in it for me? Think instead: I come to Mass to witness to my faith and to support others in witnessing to their faith. But let me put before you a proposal. No, don't worry, not Morrison's car park! But rather, next Sunday: why not choose a friend or relative. and invite them to come along with you to Mass? That might sound a bit scary. But if you pray about it first, I bet you'll be surprised. For the Holy Spirit blows where he wills.