

Rochester Cathedral commemorated two early medieval saints whose shrines were lost for nearly 500 years today

St Paulinus and St Ithamar were Bishops of Rochester in the 7th century, nearly 1400 years ago. Their shrines were dedicated by the Bishop of Rochester at a special service held on the 24th September. The Archbishop of York preached during the service. It is especially fitting that they were involved in the service as they are the contemporary successors of Paulinus and Ithamar. The Archbishop's sermon follows in full:

Paulinus & Ithamar - Dedication of restored shrines, Rochester Cathedral

“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.”

1 Peter 2. 9-10a

It is a great joy to be with you this afternoon. Bishop Jonathan, Mr Dean, thank you for your invitation to preach on this auspicious occasion.

Also, my first visit to Rochester Cathedral. I'm not quite sure how I've never been before, since I grew up not that far away in Southend on Sea staring over the estuary towards you.

‘Once you were not were people’, says Peter.

Might it be better to say, ‘once you were a people whose identity, belonging and purpose was only found in yourselves - your family, your clan, your tribe, your nation; only tied up with the things of this life in this world. Your horizon was the sky above you, the sea around you, the ground beneath your feet, and the things your eyes could see. Yes, your heart dreamed and still beat to the rhythms of love and longed for more. But it seemed just that: a dream. And you made the best of life, and were governed ensnared by these limitations’.

‘But now’, says, Peter, ‘now you are the people of God’. Now your belonging is not limited by class or kin. Now your identity is not just in yourself or for yourself. Now your purposes are the purposes of God. Because God has done something in Jesus Christ that has changed this world and our lives forever.

Our citizenship is not in Kent, or Yorkshire, or the UK, or the world, but in Christ, and in heaven.

And heaven is not some far off dream, but the day today emerging substance of our waking hours as we find ourselves in Christ, re tuning hearts to his. For God has broken down the barriers of separation that governed our lives and marked out our territory, and kept us in our place, and narrowed our horizons, and has made us a new humanity, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. He has done this in Jesus Christ by sharing intimately, passionately and joyfully in our lives, and even death itself. And by his cross, we are reconciled to one another, and to God. And by his resurrection, all stones are rolled away. Once not a people. And now the people of God.

Therefore, when we commemorate Paulinus, we remember someone who was part of that band missionaries, who came to our country at the end of the 6th and in the early years of the 7th century, to bring this good news to us. News of our liberation. To make us into the people of God.

Earlier this year, I visited the church of San Gregorio Magno al Celio and saw the head of the Crozier, that Gregory the great carried when he blessed Augustine, and sent him to the UK.

And I saw the plaque in the cloister, which listed the names of those who accompanied him in the first and second waves of this mission. And there, setting off to the unknown lands of these islands in 601 is the name, Paulinus. A monk in Rome, part of the holy nation, the royal priesthood of the people of God, coming here to bring us the good news of Jesus Christ, to extend to us, the offer of eternal life, to make us the people of God.

And although you will, I hope, forgive me not allowing too southern a gloss on the story, for Paulinus was consecrated Bishop here, not initially for Rochester, but for York – why else did you invite me to preach, and what else were you expecting me to say! – his witness down through the centuries inspires us to do today what he did then. Which is, preach the gospel. Tell the story of God’s love. Help those whose own horizons are limited and diminished, who find no hope, except what they can glean from the poor pickings of the paltry visions we have for this life only, to become the people of God.

And in commemorating Ithamar, the first ever native English Bishop, we celebrate and affirm the astonishing success of the mission to Kent. Not only churches planted. Not only people coming to faith in Christ. But indigenous, local leaders raised up, and in their turn, raising up the name of Christ, continuing this pattern of incarnational mission where the gospel of Jesus Christ always has a local address and a local face, a local accent, a local outpost and a local purpose. The church in each place and time united with the church in every age and time.

Having established the see of York in 627, Paulinus retreated back south. The northern mission field may have been just that bit too tough for someone raised in the bosom of Rome. But we remember him in the north as our Apostle and first Bishop of York. And he only just missed out on being the first Archbishop, receiving the pallium here in Kent and only a few months too late. We look forward to inviting you to York in 2027 when we celebrate his anniversary.

But in that celebration, and in this, let us, most of all, remember why we're here.

Because of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Because it changes lives. Because it changes the world. Because it changed Paulinus. Changed Ithamar. Changed me.

There are people growing up in Rochester, in Kent, in Southeast London, who know little or nothing about the gospel of Jesus Christ, and have a little or no contact with the church. They do not know the name of Christ. They do not know his story. They do not sing his songs. Indeed, for so many, it feels as it must have been for Paulinus when he first got here, that the church that lives to make him know is speaking another language.□

Therefore, please pause and pray today at the beautifully restored shrines of Paulinus and Ithamar and commit yourself to playing your part in helping those who are not a people, or, more accurately are people only tied up in themselves, to be the people of God. To find Christ. To be set free.

Tell the story. Translate the story. Put it into action in loving service, and self-forgetful kindness.

Our world fragments. We retreat to our silos. We become habituated to the very things we know will destroy us. Horror and confusion, prowl the earth. Everywhere we turn, we see sadness and confusion.

What our world needs is the medicine and the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paulinus crossed many boundaries to bring us this good news. Ithamar represents to us, the astonishing fruits of that mission in the beginnings of what became an English church, a local expression of a universal truth.

May your lives, and the life of this Cathedral Church in Diocese, inspired by Paulinus And Ithamar, upheld by the prayers, continue this mission, the work of the gospel in which every one of us has a part to play, declaring the praises of him, who called us out of darkness into his wonderful



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