

THE BAPTISM OF KING ETHELBERT.

BY THE REV. C. F. ROUTLEDGE, F.S.A.

THE baptism of Ethelbert took place on the Feast of Pentecost (June 2nd) in the year of our Lord 597. Where and by whom the ceremony was performed it is not so easy to determine, though it has been perhaps naturally assumed by the author of the "Life of St. Augustine" (in *Lives of the English Saints*) and by many others—including the present writer—that Ethelbert was baptized by St. Augustine in the little church of St. Martin.

We do not derive any certain evidence from the well-known passage of Bede, where he says that St. Augustine and his followers "in this (St. Martin's Church) first began to meet, to sing, to pray, to say mass, to preach, and to baptize, till the king being converted to the faith allowed them to preach openly, and build or repair churches in all places—when he among the rest, induced by the unspotted life of these holy men and their delightful promises which by many miracles they proved to be most certain, *believed and was baptized*"

It would seem possible from these words that there was a certain interval of time between the king's conversion and his baptism—during which time churches were built or repaired—notably the church on the site of the present Cathedral (Bede, i., ch. xxxiii.), and in all probability the church of St. Pancras.

(1.) Now it has been suggested that the ceremony of Ethelbert's baptism was not performed by St. Augustine, but by *Bishop Lindhard*, the chaplain of Queen Bertha, who, whether Bishop of Senlis, or (as Canon Browne calls him) a wandering bishop, had been "sent with her to preserve her faith" on the express stipulation of her parents.

The dates connected with Bishop Liudhard's life and ministrations are absolutely conjectural, but tradition tells us that he survived by a short time the coming of St. Augustine, being probably then a very old man. And we know that he was held in high honour by the successors of St. Augustine, and that his relics occupied a prominent place above the high altar of the Abbey Church. He is called too by Goscelinus (writing about 1080), "Dignus Deo antistes, præcursor et janitor venturi Augustini . . . Bertæ reginæ dux, comes, doctor, servator, ac totius pietatis instigator"—and of him many miracles were recorded.

If then he was still alive in 597, he was the bishop in charge, and would naturally have performed the ceremony in question.

But the principal argument in favour of his being the baptizer of Ethelbert was that he was a *bishop*, and that St. Augustine was not—and that in the presence of a bishop no presbyter could celebrate the rite of Holy Baptism. We know from various ancient writers that during the first five centuries the ceremony of baptism was, as a rule, always presided over by a bishop—and in a remarkable letter written by the clergy in Italy to Constantinople they beg the emperor to allow Dacius Bishop of Milan to return to his diocese, "quia cum pene omnes episcopi . . . mortui sint, immensa populi multitudo sine baptismo moritur." In Martene (*De Ant. Eccl. Hist.*, lib. i., c. i., art. iii., § 2) both Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great are cited in proof that *only* bishops baptized in that day—and Canon Jenkins supplies me with an extract from the 2nd Council of Seville (A.D. 619, *i.e.* only twenty-two years after the baptism of Ethelbert), declaring, "neque coram episcopo licere presbyterio in baptisterium introire, nec præsentem antistitem infantem tingere aut signare."

It is certain also that in early times the privilege of consecrating the chrism, so necessary an adjunct of baptism, was strictly confined to the episcopal order. And it is unlikely in this case that the chrism had been consecrated beforehand for use throughout the year, as it frequently was on Maundy Thursday. Neither of course could the Sacra-

ment of Confirmation have been administered, as was customary, immediately after baptism, had Æthelbert been baptized by one who was not a bishop.

Now we must give these arguments their due weight, and they amount to this. *If* Bishop Liudhard were still alive in 597 we should expect that according to the laws of church order he would have administered the rite of baptism to the king. But we have no evidence that he *was* alive then. The silence of Bede would, I suppose, be considered by some people to point to a negative conclusion—yet, on the other hand, no allusion is made by Pope Gregory in his letters to Æthelbert and St. Augustine with reference to what must have been considered such an important event in the history of the Italian Mission, though in the parallel case of Clovis letters of congratulation on the event were addressed by Pope Anastasius not only to Clovis himself, but also to the bishops of Gaul.

There is indeed an obvious objection which must be alluded to. It may be said that Bede (in the words quoted above) distinctly states that Augustine and his followers *did baptize* in St. Martin's Church, and therefore that the whole argument about the bishop's probable participation in the ceremony falls to the ground.

But, independently of the fact that the baptism of the king would stand on an entirely different footing from that of his subjects, I do not think we can press the words of Bede as limited to a strictly defined period of time (traditionally extending to about two months), but merely as embodying a general statement that St. Martin's Church was the *first* church in which St. Augustine and his followers performed the usual offices of religion.

(II.) *Where was Æthelbert baptized?* The present writer is the last person in the world to disparage the claims of St. Martin's Church, which has a clear tradition in its favour of at least 700 years. He has still some hopes of discovering traces of a piscina, or at any rate the original foundations of the font somewhere beneath the floor of the nave of St. Martin's. But it has occurred to him as a not absolutely unreasonable theory that the ceremony *may* have

taken place in the south porticus of the church of St. Pancras. It was there that Ethelbert is said to have worshipped his idols; and there (St. Augustine may have advised) should he testify to his renunciation of heathen idolatry by his public profession of the Christian religion. The present appearance of this porticus or transept, with a step down into it, has suggested the possibility of its having once been a baptistery with its necessary altar. This can only be ascertained by further excavations. It must be left indeed to further consideration whether there were any baptisteries in England at that date, or whether the first one was that erected about 750 A.D. by Cuthbert Archbishop of Canterbury at the east end of the Cathedral.

I must not be considered, however, in this short article, as in any way attempting to overthrow the paramount claims of St. Martin's Church to be the scene of such an important historical event; but only throw out these crude suggestions, as inviting discussion from antiquarians who have more time than I have for independent research, and also more ability.