

Theme: - The life and times of St Ambrose.

Saint Ambrose was born into a Roman Christian family in the year 339. He began life in Augusta modern day Trier, in the north of Italy which was then northeastern Gaul which is now in southern Germany. Ambrose was the youngest of three children. His siblings were Satyrus, an older brother and Marcellina, an older sister. Both Ambrose's siblings also became venerated as saints. Ambrose and Satyrus both received their initial training in Christianity from their mother, assisted by their older sister both of whom were devote Christians.

At the time of Ambrose's birth his father was a prefect of Gall and as such ruled the present territories of France Britain and Spain, clearly a very important person in the Roman Empire. When his father died his mother moved with her three children to Rome. There Ambrose studied literature, law, and rhetoric. He then followed in his father's footsteps and entered public service, first as a judicial councillor and then in 372 he was made governor of a province with its headquarters in Milan, and it was as governor that Ambrose became known and loved as a man of empathy and fairness to those he governed.

Two years later In 374 the bishop of Milan, Auxentius an Arian, who had been something of a tyrant, died, and the Arians challenged the succession to the post of Bishop. Arianism was a Christian heresy that declared that Christ was not truly divine but a created being, a similar belief still held by Jehovah's Witnesses.

The emperor ordered Ambrose to go to the church where the election of the new bishop of Milan was to take place, to prevent trouble between those who supported the Arians, and those of the orthodox Nicene creed, which seemed probable in this contested and crucial election. He addressed the meeting and was interrupted by a call, "Ambrose, for bishop!", which was taken up by the whole assembly.

Ambrose, though known to be a Nicene Christian in belief, was also considered acceptable to Arians due to the charity he had shown towards the Arian people, but not necessarily towards their beliefs. At first, he energetically refused the office of bishop, for which he felt he was in no way prepared: Ambrose was a relatively new Christian who was not yet baptized nor formally trained in theology. Ambrose fled to a colleague's home, seeking to hide. But upon receiving a letter from the Emperor Gratian praising the appropriateness of Rome appointing individuals worthy of holy positions, Ambrose's host gave him up.

Within a week, Ambrose was baptized, ordained, and duly consecrated as the new bishop of Milan in 374. This was the first time in the West that a member of the upper class of high officials had accepted the office of bishop, he was then 35 years old. Upon the unexpected appointment of Ambrose to the episcopate, his brother Satyrus resigned a prefecture in order to move to Milan, where he took over managing the diocese's temporal affairs, which made the running of Ambrose's diocese somewhat of a family affair.

During his career as Bishop, he promoted Roman Christianity against Arianism and paganism, he struggled with Arianism for over half of his term as bishop of Milan. On at least two occasions the emperor insisted that Ambrose hand over some churches to the Arians, but on both occasions he refused, and due to Ambrose's popularity with his people the emperor backed down on both occasions. Unity was important to the church, and to the state, and as a Roman citizen, Ambrose felt strongly about unity. In Ambrose's day conflicts over heresies loomed large and often in an age of religious ferment comparable to the Reformation of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with Arianism being the chief heresy. Orthodox Christianity was determining how to define itself as it faced multiple challenges on both a theological and a practical level, and Ambrose exercised considerable influence at a crucial time when paganism was still in the majority.

Before becoming a bishop, he was a very rich man in terms of wealth, property, and land. However, once chosen as bishop, he immediately adopted an ascetic or severe lifestyle, giving his money, his property, and his land for the welfare of the poor, and only keeping back enough to make provision for his sister Marcellina who was herself a devote Christian.

Turning now to our gospel reading from verse 25 we read, "But he, said to them 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors.'" "But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves." I'm sure we can all see the similarities with Jesus' story and Ambrose' actions directly God called him to be Bishop of Milan, where he immediately adopted a severe lifestyle.

This of course made him very popular with the ordinary people of his diocese and many others who loved their new bishop, and it was his empathy and understanding of all ranks of people that gave him considerable political leverage throughout his career.

With regard to his theology those who know about these things, number Ambrose with Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great as one of the doctors of the church. He is also referred to as Doctor of the Universal Church, which is a title given by the Catholic Church to saints recognized as having made a significant contribution to theology or doctrine through their research, study, or writing. He clearly succeeded as a theologian despite his juridical training and his comparatively late handling of biblical subjects. Ambrose also exercised a high standard of Christian ethics which he passed on to others.

Ambrose was flexible when it came to liturgy he kept in mind that liturgy was a tool to serve people in worshipping God, and he refused to be drawn into a false conflict over which particular local church had the "right" liturgical form when there was no substantial problem. Ambrose was influential in the conversion of Augustine of Hippo to the Christian faith, and also to following local liturgical custom; he told Augustine "When I am at Rome, I fast on a Saturday; when I am at Milan, I do not," which has remained in the English language ever since as the saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

In the most influential of his surviving writings, he reveals his views connecting justice and generosity by asserting that these practices are mutually beneficial to those who receive generosity as to those who give it. Ambrose draws heavily on Cicero and the biblical book of Genesis for this concept of mutual inter-dependence in society. In the

bishop's view, it is concern for one another's interests that binds society together. Ambrose asserts that greed leads to a breakdown in this mutuality, therefore greed leads to a breakdown in society itself. In the late 380s, the bishop took the lead in opposing the greed of the elite landowners in Milan by starting a series of pointed sermons directed at his wealthy constituents on the need for the rich to care for the poor. Some scholars have suggested that Ambrose's endeavours to lead his people as both a Roman and as a Christian caused him to strive for what a modern context would describe as a type of communism or socialism. He was not just interested in the church but was also interested in the condition of contemporary Italian society. Ambrose considered the poor not a distinct group of outsiders, but a part of a united people to be stood with in solidarity. Giving to the poor was not to be considered an act of generosity towards the fringes of society but a repayment of resources that God had originally bestowed on everyone equally and which the rich had usurped. He defines justice as providing for the poor whom he describes as our "brothers and sisters" because they "share our common humanity".

Boniface Ramsey wrote that it was difficult "not to put forward a deep spirituality in a man" who wrote on the mystical meanings of the Song of Songs, a book in the Old Testament, and wrote many extraordinary hymns. Despite an abiding spirituality, Ambrose had a generally straightforward and practical manner. He wrote a practical guide for his clergy for their daily ministry in his diocese. Christian faith in the third century developed the monastic lifestyle which subsequently spread into the rest of Roman society in a general practice of virginity, voluntary poverty, and self-denial. This lifestyle was embraced by many new converts, including Ambrose, even though they did not become actual monks.

The bishops of this era had heavy administrative responsibilities, and Ambrose was also sometimes occupied with imperial affairs, but he still fulfilled his primary responsibility to care for the well-being of his flock, pastoral care was high on his priorities. He preached and celebrated the Eucharist multiple times a week, sometimes daily, and dealt directly with the needs of the poor, as well as widows and orphans, and his own clergy; Ambrose had the ability to maintain good relationships with all kinds of people.

As bishop, Ambrose undertook many different labours in an effort to unite people and "provide some stability during a period of religious, political, military, and social upheavals and transformations". While Ambrose got along well with most people, Ambrose was not averse to conflict and even opposed emperors with a fearlessness born of self-confidence and a clear conscience, and not from any belief that he would not suffer for his actions. Having begun his life as a Roman aristocrat and a governor, it is clear that Ambrose retained the attitudes and practices of Roman governance even after becoming a bishop. Ambrose was very influential in moulding the church into the church we know today, he achieved a great deal in his 23 years as bishop of Milan, he died on 4th April in 397 aged 58.

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