

## SETTING THE SCENE

# Faith in the North: Light from the Past, Hope for the Future



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*In June 2023, scholars and Christian leaders gathered at an event held at Bishopthorpe to discuss how to mark the anniversary in 2027 of the baptism in York by Bishop Paulinus of King Edwin, the first King of Northumbria to profess the Christian faith. They discovered multiple challenges and encouragements for teaching, preaching, church planting, prayer, and renewal.*

*Revd Professor Dee Dyas (Centre for the Study of Christianity & Culture, University of York) explores missional discipleship and extends a bold invitation to consider how missionary disciples of the past can encourage and enhance our vision for mission today.*

### Introduction

‘In the beginning was the Word: and the Word was with God: and the Word was God ... In him was life: and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness: and the darkness did not comprehend it... And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (and we saw his glory, the glory as it were of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth.’

John 1:1;4-5;14

The opening of John’s Gospel, introducing the story of God made man, the Word made flesh entering human society, light coming into darkness and meeting resistance: a narrative of glory, grace, and truth. It’s a story of first century Palestine. It’s also, as Bede was so keen to demonstrate in his ‘Ecclesiastical History of the English People,’ the story of these islands, with multiple mission initiatives establishing the Church here in the North – and elsewhere in what was to become England. Why *did* Bede, that devoted biblical scholar, choose to invest so much precious time and resource in this detailed history of ‘church planting’? Because he saw the story of the Church in his own day as a continuation of the Gospels and the Book of Acts. Every conversion, every miracle, every

holy life, was a sign that God was at work in what Bede called the 'uttermost edge of the world', just as the New Testament shows Him at work in Judea, Asia, Greece, and Rome. From the heat of the Judean wilderness to the (usually rather cooler) North of Britain, the Word of God had come to bring transformation.

However, it was anything but a straightforward or seamless process. In 2027 we will remember the baptism in York by Bishop Paulinus of King Edwin, the first king of Northumbria to profess the Christian faith. It was a great moment and well worth celebrating but five years later Edwin was killed in battle, Paulinus took the queen and her daughter back to the safety of Kent – and all was to do again. Yet, paradoxically, that should be a real encouragement to us, for the evangelisation of England has never been simple, painless, or indeed complete. When I taught in a theological college, I used to remind students that while we may feel we got the short straw mission-wise, this country has *never* had a population who are all totally signed-up, well-educated, and consistent in terms of Christian faith. 'Light in darkness' has continued to apply through the centuries - with the darkness reluctant to give way. When we look back at the glories of Christian art, architecture, literature, music, drama etc, what we see is the *product of perseverance in mission* - regrouping, taking two steps forward and one, or even two steps back, yet hanging on in there and finding new ways to bring faith to others. This long story of missionary discipleship has been brave, sacrificial - and effective.

Today we're focusing on the North, helped by an extraordinary team of people who are both very eminent scholars and Christian leaders. Michelle Brown will share just how rich and complex were the history, culture, and populations of this region in the early Medieval period, with endless migration and cultural influences from all over the known world. This is the period which includes the stories of the Anglo-Saxons and the flowering of Anglo-Saxon spirituality – what Benedicta Ward usefully defines as, 'What the Anglo-Saxons thought and said and did and prayed in the light of the Gospel of Christ.' Following Michelle, Joyce Hill will explore some key characteristics of the Church's life and mission through the stories of those whose commitment to Christ

changed the world around them – and still challenges us today. And Sarah Foot will put all of this in context as she looks at how a mission-shaped church *then* can inspire, encourage, and challenge the growth of a mission-shaped church *today*.

### **So why are we looking back to this period at this particular time?**

Because the beliefs and reflections of the Christians who preached, prayed, and served in this region in the centuries up to the Norman Conquest have huge resonance for the anxieties, fears, and pressures faced by people today. The profound ongoing impact of the pandemic, that invisible enemy which took away so much from so many; the uncertainties caused by severe financial pressures; and the horrors of the war in Ukraine mean we now have a population which is not only very needy but knows, in a way most of us have never seen before, just how fragile life is and how suddenly relationships and other support structures can disappear. All this presents an amazing opportunity for the Church, but we too have suffered stress and loss and need to regroup and find new energy, vision, and resources. Sometimes looking back can help us see our own situation in a new light. Part of this project will involve creating multiple resources to help us explore, celebrate, and appropriate our rich heritage of faith in the North.

Those who lived in this land all those centuries ago also faced a very uncertain world. No one could know when bereavement, plague, war, or exile might leave them facing life alone, stripped of all security and significance. The fear of losing community and family, the dread of loneliness, and deep awareness of the transience of all human life, are clear to see. But following Christ not only opened up a new way of life; it also offered an enduring community to which all could belong, and a golden thread of security in a deeply insecure world. In the *Dream of the Rood*, a poetic vision of the Crucifixion, Christ is described as Lord and King of a community which will last for eternity, with a permanent home and place of belonging in heaven. This long-term security gave Christian believers a strong foundation from which to serve God and others here and now, willing to take risks and make great sacrifices *because* this life was not all there was. They could 'sit light' to status and possessions, for these were only 'lent' for a

person's lifetime and were to be used and shared gratefully and wisely. As Alcuin of York (735-804) said, 'When you sit happy in your own fair house, Remember all those who are poor, That Christ, who gave you this roof, may prepare for you, An eternal dwelling in the house of God.'

This all meant that as well as being rooted in their culture, they could also be counter-cultural. Being a citizen of heaven set them free to live by God's standards, forgiving instead of taking vengeance; sharing with those in need instead of piling up treasure; giving up their own comfort to serve others in imitation of Christ. However, such radical ideas didn't always go down well. One king of East Anglia abdicated to enter a monastery (*HE* 3:18) but when his former kingdom was attacked, he was dragged out of the cloister to encourage the troops. Refusing to defend himself, he died in the ensuing battle. Some years later, a king of the East Saxons was murdered by two of his kinsmen. According to Bede, it was because he was 'too lenient towards his enemies, and too readily forgave when the offenders asked pardon' (*HE* III:22). Following Gospel values could be costly.

The need to exercise faith in the face of opposition and conflict was a constant. Think of King Alfred, back to the wall, confronted by relentless Viking invaders who almost overran his whole country and obliterated its Christian culture. What did he do? He prayed, he planned, deployed his troops – and translated the Psalms and set up a Christian education programme so that he might not only reclaim his territory but renew his kingdom spiritually. Over these centuries we see Gospel principles transform life, learning, laws, and society – and at the heart of this transformation we can discern a number of key themes:

- Firstly, the absolute centrality of the Cross and God's offer of forgiveness and new life. We see the Cross in the Lindisfarne Gospels as well as Cuthbert's pectoral cross, the Ripon Jewel (which Joyce will be mentioning); and the great stone crosses (focal points for preaching and prayer) still to be found across our region as here in Cumbria and at Ruthwell (where lines from the Dream of the Rood are inscribed.)

- The importance of the Bible, especially the Psalms and Gospels, plus an insatiable curiosity about the whole of God's world, with Northumbria becoming an international powerhouse of light and learning
- Experiencing multiple ways of being a pilgrim (Journeying through life; Journeying to special places; Inner journey through prayer and monasticism)
- The use of beauty to signal holiness, deploying all the senses to encourage encounter with God through creative use of liturgy, art, architecture, and music.
- Mobilising art, poetry, and preaching to communicate the Gospel in culturally accessible forms
- Preaching, teaching and caring
- Connecting with ordinary people *and* engaging strategically with leaders
- Being risk-takers in their outreach across Britain (including evangelising the South), as well as on the Continent
- Being flexible in adapting to new opportunities and challenges
- Finally, seeing the story of the birth and growth of their own church as unquestionable evidence of the continuing work and love of God

## Conclusion

This, as we said at the beginning, is the story of the Word made flesh, of glory, grace, and truth, a story which has shaped the North *because* of the faith of our predecessors; and which *we* are commissioned to bring alive afresh for the North in our own time. So this gathering is an invitation to consider how the inspiration and resources offered by these missionary disciples of the past can encourage and enhance our vision for mission today.

