

Then and Now: Pastoral Reflections on the Northern Saints

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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.

Canon Professor Joyce Hill, University of Leeds explains key characteristics of the Church's life and mission through the stories of those whose commitment to Christ changed the world around them – and how this still challenges us today.

My contribution to our exploration today is primarily to tell stories – stories of some of the northern saints by whom our mission can be inspired, and whose lives can inspire and engage others, pointing as I do so to a sample of themes, topics and resources for *Faith in the North*. These are saints who lived in difficult times, faced political turmoil, dealt with secular authorities who did not always understand what they were about; in times of change and challenge they were bold, daring, creative, suffered setbacks and recovered from them, never wavering in their belief, and in their commitment to conversion and the building up of the community of faith.

Today, I shall be saying something about Paulinus (of course!), and more particularly Aidan, Hild and Wilfrid. There are many other men and women I could have chosen, but with the time-constraints that we have, I present these – briefly – as a foretaste of what we can provide in our on-line resources: a rich array of saints who are, in the end, people like us, to whom we can relate in so very many ways.

Why have I chosen these? Because they are courageous, undaunted, willing to step into the unknown, adaptive, imaginative in their outreach, and speak to us in different ways, so that they illustrate – albeit in small measure here today – the varied inspiration that our northern saints can offer, appealing through their stories to young and old, men and

women, speaking of faith in the privacy of personal prayer, faith in the public square, serving as models for meditation and mission, and supporting creative engagement, as we said in our initial handout, in contexts such as Lent courses, quiet days, preaching, special services, anniversary celebrations, building relationships with schools, communities, local history groups, tourism authorities, and sharing our spiritual heritage with our visitors and pilgrims. With an eye also on the many different traditions within the Church of England, you will notice that my choice of saints straddles the different traditions of Christianity in the north, and includes those who came from elsewhere (Aidan and Paulinus), those who reached out from Northumbria to other kingdoms in England and to other lands (Wilfrid), and those who built up the church by training its leaders (Hild) and by finding creative ways, at the same time, to reach out to those beyond the circle of Christian learning by seeing the value of presenting biblical stories through the familiar medium of native oral poetry (Hild once again). They were practically minded and socially responsive – one thinks of Wilfrid teaching the people of Sussex to fish in the time of famine, for example. They got alongside people – Aidan for instance giving away the horse that the king had given him because he did not want to sit aloft, but wished rather to walk amongst the people to whom he was ministering.

But before I say a little more about these saints, I want to comment on the image that I have chosen to accompany this talk. It is the Ripon Jewel, found in the vicinity of the site of Wilfrid's monastery in 1976. In a way it serves as an emblem for what we are about. It is, as you will see, a cross held within the circle of eternity, and probably comes from a reliquary-cover or, just as likely, from the cover of a gospel-book or the decorated box in which the gospel book was kept when not on display on the altar. In either case, the beauty of the exterior, of which this jewel was a part, speaks of the spiritual jewel within – a concept that was well appreciated at the time. The jewel is now on display in Ripon Cathedral Library, but I present it to you here as found, before it was cleaned up. And I do so as a further emblem that is appropriate for today: an uncovering, a revelation, a discovery of the past in the present and for the present. I should also point out that when it was created, to judge from its style and technique probably in the eighth century it was, in the way it uses the gold and garnet, an expression of faith firmly rooted in the local

visual culture of the day. This, in its general style and workmanship, is just like the gold and garnet war-gear of the Staffordshire Hoard, or the jewelled accoutrements of the warrior-king of the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial. The cross within the circle of eternity here is expressed in ways that were deliberately culturally familiar: in the time of the Northern Saints it represented our faith in our way.

Into this alien culture came the Italian Paulinus as part of a group sent by the Pope to reinforce the mission of St Augustine. These reinforcements arrived in the kingdom of Kent in 601, only four years after Augustine himself, after an arduous journey across difficult terrain and through many polities, making their way through societies suspicious of strangers, to what was still a fledgling mission, in a land described by Bede as being 'at the uttermost edge of the world'. It was how everyone saw the location of Britain. We should never underestimate the courage of those who made the long journey here from Rome, the centre of Western Christendom, still somewhat redolent of its past imperial glories, to an unknown land of strange customs and foreign tongues. But this was not Paulinus's only uprooting: he remained in Kent for more than twenty years, but was then consecrated bishop so as to accompany the daughter of the Kentish king on her marriage to Edwin, king of Northumbria, with the express aim – as a condition of the marriage – that he would spearhead a conversion of the north. In his few years in Northumbria he was very successful, but he suffered a huge setback when his sponsor, King Edwin, was killed in battle. Edwin's widow and daughter, together with Paulinus, fled back to Kent. The pallium sent by Pope Honorius to confer metropolitan authority on Paulinus in York, arrived too late. But despite this setback, Paulinus, the great missionary, was not daunted, and shortly after his return south he became the third bishop of Rochester (the first bishopric to be established in England after Canterbury). There he continued his faithful work until his death in October 644. It's easy to summarise his life, but it is inspirational when we pause to think about the challenges that it involved and the faith that drove him forward.

Aidan, like Paulinus, was also an incomer and an effective missionary, having travelled from Iona in the Irish kingdom of Dal Riada to Northumbria when King Oswald of Northumbria, after fighting his way to the throne following the death of King Edwin, asked

Iona to send a missionary. Oswald, as a young prince, had been in exile in Dal Riada during the rival kingship of Edwin, and there he had been converted, so it was not surprising when, from his more northerly power-base at Bamburgh, he turned to the missionary-monastery of Iona for help. But Aidan was not the first missionary to be sent. The first gave up in fairly short order, and returned to Iona, reporting that he had made no headway because the people were 'intractable, obstinate, and uncivilised'. A long discussion followed, and finally Aidan spoke up, offering a sensible and sensitive solution: 'It seems to me, brother, that you have been unreasonably harsh upon your ignorant hearers: you did not first offer them the milk of simpler teaching, as the apostle recommends [1 Cor. 3: 2], until little by little, as they grew strong on the food of God's word, they were capable of receiving more elaborate instruction and of carrying out the more transcendent commandments of God'. Aidan was duly sent and throughout his life lived out the approach to mission that he had put forward, with great humility, as we know in refusing to travel around on horseback because he wished to move among the people, literally at their level. As a former monk of Iona, Bishop Aidan adhered to the Irish tradition of calculating the date of Easter, which was abhorrent to Bede, but such was Aidan's humility and holiness that he won Bede's heartfelt admiration – the Easter question apart! Bede praised his 'love of peace and charity, temperance and humility', his triumph over anger and greed, and 'his industry in carrying out and teaching the divine commandments, his diligence in study and keeping vigil, his authority, such as became a priest, in reproving the proud and mighty, and his tenderness in comforting the weak, in relieving and protecting the poor'. Lindisfarne was Oswald's gift to Aidan for his missionary-base and there he established a humble monastery similar to that of Iona, and from which he often withdrew, as Cuthbert was to do later, to pray in solitude when he was not indefatigably travelling around on foot –in the early years, dependent on King Oswald to translate for him, since he, like Paulinus, was bold enough to embark on a mission among people whose language he did not know.

With Hild we link back to Paulinus because, aged about 13, she was baptized by Paulinus in 627 at the same time as King Edwin, who was her uncle. In adult life she planned to become a nun at Chelles, near Paris, which had been founded by an English-woman,
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joining her sister Hereswith, who was already there. But Aidan persuaded her that there was great need for her talents in England. With his encouragement, she founded a small monastery on the River Wear (site not known) and then became Abbess of Hartlepool (647-651), before establishing the double-monastery of Whitby, which she ruled as Abbess until her death in 680. Here was a woman with a strong personal commitment, an international outlook, but willing to put her own personal inclinations to one side and take on the more difficult task of fostering the religious life in the mission-field of Northumbria. And this, you will notice, was on the advice of Aidan, despite her own conversion and baptism by Paulinus being into the Roman tradition, as was also her initial impetus to join a nunnery near Paris. Whitby under Hild's leadership was, as we all know, of sufficient standing to host the Synod of Whitby. The scholarly standards she set are testified to by the first ever Latin life of Gregory the Great being written there – Gregory who sent the Augustinian mission from Rome, and who was regarded by the Anglo-Saxons as 'the apostle of the English' for that very reason. And Whitby was also a centre for training bishops. According to Bede, five bishops trained there were consecrated to English sees (Bosa to York; Ætla to Dorchester on Thames; Otfar to Worcester; John of Beverley to Hexham and then York; Wilfrid II to York after John, and the last to be Bishop rather than Archbishop). But in today's context the story I want to tell is of Hild's enterprise and insight into how to reach out beyond the scholarly and ecclesiastical circles in which she lived.

On the Whitby monastic estate, there was a cowherd, by the name of Cædmon, a man fairly advanced in years. In the evenings, when there was feasting and his fellow-workers took to singing traditional songs as the harp was passed around, he would duck out by leaving early. Once, when he ducked out and went to the byre to sleep because it was his turn to take charge of the cattle that night, someone in a dream asked him to sing something. Cædmon said he couldn't. But his speaker persisted. So Cædmon asked what he should sing about. 'Sing to me about the creation', came the reply, and so Cædmon instantly composed a new 9-line poem in praise of God the Creator, in English, in the traditional form of oral poetry – the form, but not the content, of the secular traditions that were being celebrated in the songs at the feasting not far away. The next morning

Cædmon added to it, and then reported his gift of Christian poetry to the estate manager. He took Cædmon to Abbess Hild who, to test whether this was indeed a divine gift, had a passage of scripture read to him. When Cædmon turned this into traditional vernacular verse, the community recognised the gift as coming from God and Hild, in her wisdom, made good use of it! She took the radical, independent-minded step of admitting this elderly cowherd to the monastery as a brother and, although he never did learn to read or write, she had his fellow-monks read scriptural stories to him so that he could turn them into accessible and memorable traditional vernacular verse, recognising the immense value this had for spreading the word – all the more remarkable, I always think, given the fundamentally scholarly nature of the Whitby community. Here was wisdom in leadership – innovation, practicality, creativity, without in any way compromising what the monastery of Whitby stood for.

And last but not least, Wilfrid, who allows me to introduce another set of resources for mission: the beauty of our buildings and their interpretation, the heritage that allows us to open dialogue with the curious, and the capacity of our places of worship to lift us up through the beauty of what they are and what is heard and seen and shared within them.

Of all our Northern Saints, it is Wilfrid who most obviously recognised the importance of beauty and sensory perception in fostering and sustaining our relationship with God. These were lessons he learnt on his travels to Rome, especially his first journey, when he was a very young man. As a result, he built stone basilicas in Ripon and Hexham in the style of what he had seen in Rome, quite unlike the buildings round about, just as our churches and cathedrals are today. And each had a crypt which echoed the mystery of the catacombs, where we believe relics were kept for veneration, no doubt in reliquaries whose gold and jewels flickered in the candlelight, the mystery being enhanced by the winding passage underground, opening to the cubiculum where the relics would be displayed. Wilfrid was, as we know from his biographer, Stephen of Ripon, a member of the Ripon community who knew Wilfrid well, a great collector of relics, as he was also of liturgical vestments from the continent, and textiles dyed in rich colours and beautified with gold and silver thread for adorning the interior of the basilica. He had a gospel-book

made for the dedication of the monastery at Ripon, which was written in gold on parchment dyed purple and protected, when not on display on the altar, in a case encrusted with precious metalwork and jewels. And he invited two singing masters from Canterbury – where their tradition of chant was that of St John Lateran – to come to Ripon to teach that tradition to his community. We no longer live in a world of small, simple buildings made of wood and wattle and daub; there is no shortage of music for us to enjoy in many different settings; and our world is full of colour and richness of texture. Yet we still find our spirits lifted by sight and sound, smell and touch in the settings of our churches and cathedrals. How much greater must have been the impact in Wilfrid’s day, when the beauty of the divine was embodied in his churches, and the soul was uplifted far beyond the life of everyday. To this I could add stirring stories of Wilfrid’s missionary work across England and in Frisia, but today I wanted to focus our attention, through him, on the buildings themselves, which are a resource that is always present for us to draw upon and be inspired by in so many ways.

Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, is the source of many of our inspiring and engaging stories. With this work as a major resource for pastoral engagement, I should like to conclude with Bede’s words at the end of the *History*:

I pray, merciful Jesus, that as you have graciously granted me to drink sweetly from the Word which tells of you, so will you, of your goodness, grant that I may come at length to you, the fount of all wisdom, and stand before your face for ever.

