

The Early Medieval North: Crucible of Faith

Canon Professor Michelle Brown



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.

Professor Michelle Brown, Author of 'Bede and the Theory of Everything' shares details of this timeline of history and of a powerful faith in the North, visible public context and the very modern-day strategy of pilgrim destinations.

Despite the SE London accent, I am in part a product of early Northumbria. My mother's parents were Mackams, who walked down from Monkwearmouth on the Jarrow marches and stayed in London to work on the East India Docks. My father's folk were a mixture of southern and northern Irish who likewise sought employment in London. At the age of 4, my Irish father and Northumbrian mother took me to the BM to see the Lindisfarne Gospels, so full of cultural resonance for them both. The Germanic animal interlace and Celtic spiralwork, the Greek and Latin display lettering and the stylised Romano-Byzantine figures of the evangelists reached out and drew me in. That night I wrote in my little girl diary that instead of being an astronaut I would be a librarian! Little did I know that this marked the conscious stirring of a lifetime's journey into deeper relationship with the Cosmic Logos, exploring eternity through the pages of the Word.

When the Vulgate was printed at the Reformation, scholars found that the most authentic editorial reconstructions of the work that St Jerome undertook in translating the Bible into the vernacular (vulgata) of the day – Latin – in his cell in Bethlehem in the 380s were the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Codex Amiatinus, both made in early 8th-century Northumbria. In 716 Amiatinus was taken from the twin monastery of Monkwearmouth/Jarrow as a present for the Pope by abbot Ceolfrith, who had commissioned it, along with a copy each for Monkwearmouth and Jarrow. Amiatinus

served as an ambassador for the newly formed English Church and people, yet so convincing was its text and stylistic Italo-Byzantine cloaking mechanism that it was only in the 1880s that it was recognised as English work, rather than that of Italo-Byzantine scribes and artists. The Apostolic Mission had come of age, the Gospel had been preached in the watery north-western extremities of the then known world. The message to the ancient Mediterranean heartland was that only in these remote islands could now be found the library and intellectual resources and the evangelical spirit to transform society and gather in the harvest for the end times.

The Lindisfarne Gospels, as part of the cult of St Cuthbert, have become something of a rallying point for regional identity in the NE and, sad to say, as much of a cash cow as the vellum skins upon which they are written. It is so much more. This remarkable book was made single-handedly between 715-722 by Eadfrith, the busy bishop of Holy Island, largely whilst in retreat on Cuddy's Isle, as a transformative act of penitential retreat and prayer on behalf of all, with input from Wearmouth/Jarrow and his friend Bede, immersed in Nature and using natural and spiritual resources to their full. It is a dynamic conduit of the Word and of the successful attempts of a people – or rather peoples - to keep the flame of faith alive through the darkest of times. Its powerful style represents a fusion of ingredients drawn from the rich melting-pot of peoples and cultures in the North – like visiting a modern Italo-Turkish-Anglo-Irish fusion restaurant. The words on the menu alone would evoke vast cultural Serengetis, just as its artistic ingredients – Celtic La Tène spiralwork, Germanic animal interlace, Pictish motifs and Mediterranean figural art - did for peoples who, for centuries, had signalled who they were and what they believed by the ornament on their metalwork and ink on their skin. The vision that Eadfrith created is one of unity in diversity and of an eternal harmony in which all peoples, the flora and fauna and the elements of Creation enter into an eternal harmony, sustained by Logos. For 'In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God' (John 1:1).

Each of the Gospels is introduced by a carpet-page, called that because they look like oriental rugs, but I have found that we were actually using prayer-mats in England as part of the legacy of early eastern Christianity that Islam also adopted. Embedded in each is a different type of cross: Matthew has the Latin cross, Mark the Celtic ring-head, Luke the Greek doctor has the Greek cross and John, the mystic, the Coptic and Ethiopic tau cross. Four acts of witness, four traditions of churchmanship united in harmony. Opposite each stands the decorated opening of each Gospel, the display lettering incorporating letter-forms from the Latin, Greek, Irish Ogam and Germanic runic-style alphabets. Another fourfold harmony. The accompanying images of the evangelists are identified by their symbols: Matthew the Man, representing the Incarnation of Christ); Mark, the lion of Judah, signifying kingship and resurrection; Luke, who speaks of the Passion, the sacrificial calf or bull; John, the visionary who flies directly to the throne of God and is symbolised by the eagle (pace Augustine, Gregory the Great and Bede). Matthew and Luke are mortal and ageing and signify the human nature of Christ, whilst Mark and John are clean-shaven and eternally youthful – the divine nature of Christ. This neat visual diptych summarises the solution to one of the great divisive Church controversies of the day – the Monothelete Controversy – which grappled with ‘how could Christ be both human and divine?’. This had been pulling the eastern churches apart for centuries and was debated at the 6th Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 681 and at a pre-summit convened in Hatfield, outside London, two years earlier by the new Archbishop of Canterbury – Theodore of Tarsus, one of the most erudite theologians of the international Orthodoxy of which the English Church then formed a part. He revived learning, along with Abbot Hadrian of Canterbury – a Berber from N Africa (this was a cosmopolitan church with international horizons – my recent research at St Catherine’s Sinai has even revealed the presence of two Northumbrian scribes there in the 8th century). The conclusion in 681 was that the two wills were inseparable and that the human will of Christ could never disobey his divine will. The cosmopolitan English Church was at the forefront of international Christian debate and was finding innovative ways of communicating its message of reconciliation in the Esperanto of art, displayed in the most visible public context – the main pilgrim destination of the day – a very modern strategy.

This is, frankly, surprising, given that St Augustine had only been dispatched by Pope Gregory the Great in 597 to help convert the pagan Germanic overlords of what had been Roman Britannia. This was a multi-pronged endeavour. That same year saw the death, on Iona, of another key evangelist, St Columba, a prince of Church and State in Ireland, who had left his native Derry to continue the work of converting the Picts (the painted or tattooed ones) of southern Scotland and the tribes of northern Britain which had been started by a Briton, St Ninian, in the early 5th century. Neither oceans nor the mighty Pennines could impede this work of the Lord. Columba's followers extended this mission south-eastwards into Northumbria, a bipartite kingdom focused upon Bernicia in the North (with its royal centres at Yeavering and Bamburgh) and Deira to the South, focusing upon the former Roman administrative centre of York.

Ireland, of course, had started to be converted to Christianity in the 5th century by figures including Palladius, sent from Rome in 431, and St Patrick who went there as a captive slave from the British kingdoms of Cumbria or Strathclyde, but who escaped to southern France (where he studied the ways of the eastern desert father John Cassian) and returned to convert his pagan Irish captors during the second half of the 5th century. The Columban network of monasteries extended, by 700 from Derry, Durrow and Kells in Ireland to Iona, Abercorn, Aberlady, Melrose,, Norham on Tweed, Coldingham, Lindisfarne, Tynemouth, Hartlepool, Whitby, Lastingham, Crayke, Lichfield, Bradwell-on-Sea in Essex and Tilbury on Thames.

Yet this was not the start of Christianity in the North, it was a revival and evangelistic mission. In 306 Constantine was proclaimed Emperor in York, by the Roman troops he led. He marched on Rome, triumphing in the sign of the Cross, which he said he saw superimposed upon Apollo's sun, at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. In 313 he and his colleague in the eastern part of the Empire, Licinius, passed the Edict of Milan granting freedom of worship for all, including the persecuted Church. By the 380s Christianity had become the state religion of the Roman Empire, from its eastern limes to Hadrian's Wall. The bishopric of Roman Eboracum (York) is one of the earliest recorded in Britain and its bishops attended the Synod of Arles in 314 and the Council of Nicaea in 325. Then, in 410,

came the Honorian Rescript - a brutal reverse Brexit – in which the western Empire, beleaguered by ideological terrorist raids, pressure of economic migrants, recession and bad government, cut Britannia off, telling it to look to its own defences, without the economic resources, leadership or international infrastructure with which to do so.

The then 'global economy' crashed and burned. Into the power vacuum emerged the shadowy Messianic figure of 'Arthur', champion of the Christian status quo, the 'superb tyrant' Vortigern, intent upon reviving Celtic tribal war-leaders, and Germanic raiders who claimed descent from semi-mythical dynastic founders such as Hengist and Horsa, mercenaries who bit the hand that fed them and carved out bully-boy territories of their own. Angles, Saxon, Jutes, Frisians and the like, a motley assembly of refugees and economic opportunists who gained respectability at the pen of Bede as the 'Anglo-Saxons' – something to recall in the face of xenophobic sabre-rattling. Bede, an Angle from Northumbria and part of the second generation of converts, accorded priority to his own people when he related, in his 'History of the English Church and People', or *Historia Ecclesiastica*, completed in 731 and the most detailed source for early Anglo-Saxon England, how Gregory the Great visited the slave markets in the sub-iura of Roma and, seeing beatific blond children for sale, pronounced them to be 'non Angli, sed angeli', not Angles but angels! The English were born as a concept (if only subsequently, in Bede's mind) and Augustine's rescue mission was despatched.

Gregory's intention was to revive the diocesan structure of the early Roman Church in Britain and Augustine's archiepiscopal cathedra should have been in London. But the seat of power now lay in the court of the King of Kent, Ethelbert, and fair welcome had been assured by the nagging and cajoling of his wife, Bertha, a Christian Frankish princess whose marriage contract accorded her right of worship, which she and her confessor did in a little Roman mortuary chapel outside the city walls of Canterbury – St Martin's, which Augustine extended as the base of his mission and which stands there still. When his follower, Mellitus, established St Paul's Cathedral in London (where I was once on Chapter) in 604, he wrote to Gregory the Great saying, essentially, 'I'm here boss. They have religions already, what do I do? To which wise Gregory replied 'If there's a party

going on, join in! if there's a place where people have brought their hopes and fears for generations, and evil does not take place there, make it your own.' So holy wells in use since the bronze age and standing stones (such as the giant phallus at which dwarfs the adjacent church) remain and Easter was named for the pagan Germanic goddess, Eostre. Not syncretism, but a recognition of the need for tolerance, interfaith and patience and of a deep pre-existing Celtic prehistoric engagement with the environment and our fellow creatures, which was to bring something new to the Judaeo-Greek foundations of the Christian mainstream – Creation care. Around 600 St Columbanus, an Irish missionary to Gaul, Switzerland and Italy, could write "Nature is a second Scripture, in which we perceive God".

Another member of the Augustinian mission, Paulinus from St Andrew's in Rome, was sent North in 625 to accompany princess Æthelburg, a Kentish Christian convert, on a diplomatic marriage to the pagan King of Northumbria, Edwin. Another high-level court conversion followed, with the ranks of the Anglian aristocracy receiving baptism in Northumbria's mighty rivers and at Yeavinger and York, the establishment of several churches and the refoundation of the bishopric of York in 627. The pallium was sent to Paulinus from the Pope in 634, after he was back in Kent and had become Bishop of Rochester. For, when the king fell in battle at Hatfield Chase in 633, Paulinus and the royal family had to flee to Kent, leaving behind James the Deacon to keep the flame of faith alive, operating out of the southernmost outposts of Lincoln and the British kingdom of Catterick. Paulinus was courageous in being the first Roman to penetrate the North since Hadrian's Wall was abandoned. He had revived the northern archdiocese at York, but his mission had failed in the short term and most of the new converts apostacised, with some exceptions, notably Hild who would become the saintly abbess of Columban Hartlepool and Whitby. Out of reversal comes perseverance and we never know whom the bread we cast up on the water feeds.

Not so the grass-roots conversion tactics of the Columban mission, in which 'walking the walk' of the Gospel and living lives of austerity and service of God and those in need was what earned respect, conversion and emulation, rather than political court conversions

reliant upon a 'trickle down' concept. The courageous, inspired and inspirational men and women who set sail in the 'boat with no oars', to go wherever God had work for them to do, came in their droves from Ireland and the Irish expat communities of western Scotland, the NW, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany, for half of our coast faces the Atlantic and Celtic Seas. They provided humanitarian aid, healing, education and, most importantly, the present and eternal hope of faith. They created sustainable communities, leadership and role models during one of the worst times to be alive, other than the Black Death in the 1380s and in many parts of the world today. One such was Lindisfarne, founded by St Aidan of Iona in 635 at the behest of King Oswald as a spiritual power-house for Northumbria. So successful was it that in 793 it became the first target in Europe of pagan Viking raids. The Danes carved out their territories south and east of the Pennines and the Norse to their north and west, the former continental Europe facing and the latter Atlantic facing.

Not until the mid-tenth century did 'England' come to exist as a Christian nation under a single monarch. It had been a long and complex process during which many peoples were assimilated, integrated and suppressed and relations with neighbouring Celtic and Scandinavian peoples stabilised. Northumbria's key role in this came about because it lay on the frontline of interaction – the meeting place of peoples. When King Edgar marked the completion of the process of unification of free England and the Danelaw and of the recognition of English overlordship by its Celtic neighbours in 973, he did so by having their kings row his royal barge along the River Dee at the ancient Roman site of Chester, at the sharp end of the interaction between North and South, central England and the Celtic West.

A year or so before Covid struck, I was invited with Rory Stewart to address a group of senior politicians, civil servants and churchpeople at the Westminster Abbey Institute on the subject of global change and response. My remit was to talk about what happened when the western part of the Roman Empire and its international economy imploded during the 5th century. At the end of my presentation, one very senior figure asked 'Are we entering another Dark Age, then?', to which I replied 'I don't expect it will be that

bright!' and explained that we no longer think of the 5th-8th centuries as the dark age, but as one illuminated by tremendous spiritual and cultural achievement in which new economic and political models emerged and the identities of many of our modern states were born. What made the difference was not strong leadership, government policy or imperial aggrandisement, but the faith, risk taking and sheer hard graft of individual men and women, living together in community and doing the Lord's work in the world, or in solitary retreat for a season or a lifetime of intense prayer. Can we do likewise?

Christian ethics transformed society and changed warlords thriving on intimidation, protectionism, extortion, raiding and rape into Christian monarchs with a literate, learned clerical administration. This was hard won. Convert kings were assassinated and missionaries martyred. Yet bit by bit law and order prevailed: Bede writes that during Edwin's reign a woman with babe in arms could walk unmolested from one coast of Northumbria to the other, sustained by the water fountains set up en route, and in the 690s Abbot Adomnan of Iona, who worked closely with its daughter house of Lindisfarne, was able to introduce to Irish legislature the Law of Innocents, protecting women, children, clerics and other non-combatants in warfare. Monasteries and churches were built with schoolrooms, hospitals and guesthouses, slaves were freed at the shrines of saints and the records written into their Gospel books, and English women achieved the best legal rights of any women in the world until the 1930s. Some became highly respected abbesses, scribes of Scripture and patrons of the arts. One such was Hild. To her was entrusted the organisation, diplomacy and hosting of the great Synod of Whitby in 664, convened to debate differences in observance between the various mission churches at work in Britain, notably of the calculation of the moveable feast of Easter – part of a centuries-long international controversy. This was long presented, simplistically, as Celtic versus Roman, but was in fact a struggle for supremacy between the traditions of the Columban federation and those of international Orthodoxy. For Gregory the Great, as Pope, was the westernmost of the Orthodox patriarchs, the poor-relation answerable to Constantinople, who lamented being left at the helm of the leaky barque of the West – not an omnipotent Medici pope!

Internationalism and ecumenical unity prevailed at Whitby. The eloquent voice of St Wilfrid, who had trained at Lindisfarne and been permitted to travel to Gaul and Rome, argued the case successfully but heralded an ongoing tension between a Romanocentric hierarchical and urban approach to Church structure and the more organic rural, monastic, community-led Irish model, of which Lindisfarne became a figurehead and where whole families could become attached and live God-centred lives (with safeguarding issues and responsibilities in rehabilitating convicted felons adding to their pastoral brief). Bede's lives of St Cuthbert, and a good deal of his *History of the English Church and People*, seek to defend the example of Lindisfarne in the face of attacks by Wilfrid's coterie. St Cuthbert is presented as the ideal union of the monastic and episcopal leader, a hermit who built his oratory on an island in view of the window of King Ecgfrith of Northumbria – Lazarus at the gate of Dives – proclaiming "If only I could build a cell with wall so high that all I could see was the sky, I'd still be afraid that the love of money and the cares of this world would steal me away." A constant reminder to a leader intent upon the genocide of neighbouring ancient British kingdoms and on warfare with Scotland and Ireland, both allied fellow Christians, that following Christ entailed a different way and that with power comes responsibility. Cuthbert's cult flourished on Holy Island, Inner Farne, Norham-on-Tweed, Chester-le-Street and Durham, and flourishes still, with Cuddy fondly referred to as a family friend in many a northern household. The people haven't all forgotten the value of these early exemplars, even if churches sometimes may in a rush for contemporary relevance.

It took the reforming efforts of a new post-Whitby Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus to further the process of creating dioceses and parishes and this was still going on until well after the Norman Conquest. He visited the North as part of this, reconfiguring the dioceses and personnel. A sculpture at Urswick in Cumbria depicts his meeting with Bishop Trumwine during this work.

By 715 the last bastion of Columban divergent practice, Iona, finally subscribed to the orthodoxy of Chalcedon and its traditions. That year saw the commencement of the making of the Lindisfarne Gospels by Bishop Eadfrith as a symbolic textual and visual

enshrinement of the harmony of Creation sustained by Logos. It also witnessed the preparations for the embassy of Abbot Ceolfrith and the Codex Amiatinus to Rome. The English Church was exploring and proclaiming its multi-faceted identity and celebrating its multi-cultural roots in a season of reconciliation.

A generation later renowned clerical scholar, Alcuin of York, would write a poem extolling the library of York, which contained over a thousand manuscripts, none of which are known to survive. Benedict Biscop and Ceolfrith had reconstructed at the twin monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow (whose late 7th-century fabric survives still) the remnants of some of the great libraries of the early Christian period. Their walls displayed paintings and icons that they brought back from Rome during six pilgrimages, enacting Gregory the Great's injunction that 'in images the illiterate read' and opening wide the door for western figurative art. The archbishops of York had evidently also been doing their part to accumulate and have copied key works of classical, early Christian and local Insular learning. After 627 York's impressive episcopal roll-call included St Chad, St Wilfrid, Bosa and St John of Beverley.

Alcuin was head-hunted by Charlemagne to form part of his scholarly equipe and, as abbot of Tours, produced an edition of the Vulgate, based on the Italo-Northumbrian tradition of the Ceolfrith Bibles. This was published, on the Wearmouth-Jarrow model, by the Tours scriptorium for circulation throughout the Carolingian Empire and Northumbria's vital contribution to the ongoing transmission of Scripture was ensured, with Alcuin's edition becoming the basis of the medieval university theology syllabus. The North was also responsible for the earliest translations of the Gospels into the English language, which became the new international Vulgate and the basis of the reception of the Word across such a large part of the world.

In 876 the community of St Cuthbert relocated its HQ from Holy Island, not, as is usually said, for fear of Viking attacks but, as I have proposed, because Bamburgh Castle and Lindisfarne had become marginalised. The centre of power now resided in Viking central – York / Jorvik. They processed the relics of St Cuthbert around southern Scotland, Cumbria and Bernicia, reasserting the saint's authority and explaining to affiliate

communities, from Aberlady to Whithorn and Carlisle, why they were relocating (although sculptures and archaeology on Holy Island show that they did not relinquish it). They then did something very strange for those fleeing the Vikings. They went to their most southerly daughter house of Crayke, some 8 miles from York, and staged a bloodless coup, displacing the Viking leader and putting a captured Danish convert, Guthred, in his place.

Subsequently, King Alfred, hiding out in the Somerset marshes and busy burning cakes, started having visions of St Cuthbert. He now had a diplomatic bridgehead into the North, via the community of Cuthbert, and was able, following a military pushback, to negotiate a partition treaty with the Vikings. The followers of St Cuthbert continued to work tirelessly to safeguard the Christian faith and ethics in the heart of the Danelaw. Cuthbert became once more a rallying point for the reconciliation and harmonisation of the ethnic, cultural, political and spiritual melting pot of the North. His cult was the most popular in England prior to Becket. Alfred's son and grandson, Athelstan, visited Cuthbert's shrine at Chester-le-Street, where the community had relocated in 883 and remained until 995 when it moved to defensible Durham. In the mid-10th century a monk named Aldred joined the community, probably sent by the reforming party of Wessex, and was allowed to write an Old English gloss between the lines of the Latin Lindisfarne Gospels, a focal point of Cuthbert's cult. This gloss, in Northumbrian dialect, was more a schoolroom word by word translation than a polished literary one, but it reasserted English in an area where Old Norse was now the first language of many and has been considered the oldest surviving version of the Gospels in English. However, my forthcoming book, *Bede and the Theory of Everything*, which will be launched with a lecture tour of the NE at the end of September, celebrating this the 1350th anniversary of Bede's birth, identifies the presumed lost translation of the Gospel of St John - the 'little Gospel that treats of the things that work of love' - that Bede spent his last days on earth labouring on in his cell at Jarrow. This pushes the earliest translation of a biblical text into a western vernacular language back to 735 and situates it on Tyneside. Earlier, Bede had proposed that the

Pater Noster and Creed should be available in English, for local priests struggled with the Latin versions, unintelligible to their flocks.

It took many centuries for Bede's avant garde pastoral and evangelical concerns to be fully implemented. The Royal Injunctions of 1536 required that the Pater Noster, Creed and Commandments be taught in English and that each parish purchase a copy of the Great Bible in English and make it available to all.

Bede also wrote poetry and is said to have loved the 'pop' songs of his people. One of the other earliest surviving monuments of Old English culture is the Ruthwell Cross, its iconography exploring the relationship between the active and the contemplative and its borders carved with Germanic runes relating part of the Old English poem 'The Dream of the Rood', even though it lay deep within the territory of the ancient British kingdom of Rheged, absorbed by Northumbria by 730. Here, the Cross speaks, telling of what it meant to be felled by enemies, forced to be an instrument of torture and to bear aloft the young hero, who clasped it like a lover. Christianity had tapped into the deep waters of earlier oral culture and found a language that all could understand. Within a couple of generations the Vikings were also being converted and equating the new Christian tradition of heroic patience and self-sacrifice with their own beliefs and tales, which in the process were transformed. In 10th-century Cumbria the Rood was once more raised up at Gosforth, with the hero Odin preparing the way for Christ's supreme victory over death.

There is, and has long been, a powerful faith in the North. I have faith in the North and that is why I too am in the process of relocating there, on the Northern Saints' Way, near Chester-le-Street, grateful that God's prompting to step aboard the 'boat with no oars' on *peregrinatio* has brought me and mine safe home to play our small part in nurturing the growth of the Living Tree of faith in the fertile soil of the North.

