

# Faith in the North: Inspiration from the Northern Saints for Leadership



The Revd Canon Dr Mark Powley

Mission Enabler for the North

## Introduction

I want to begin with a reflection on Matthew's gospel which I hope turns out to be less tenuous than it first appears. Matthew begins his gospel saying that there are 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 from David to the exile in Babylon and 14 from the exile to the Messiah. Well, here is my version. From the writing of the first NT letters there are just over 650 years to the creation of the Lindisfarne Gospels; from the Lindisfarne Gospels another 650 years to the work of Wycliffe, which set a gospel fire within English language and culture; and from there, 650 years to today! 650...650...650 - give or take!

Going back to Matthew, the point of his observation is not really about uncannily symmetrical timescales. Matthew's point is that, for the Christian, time collapses in on itself and concertinas, so that the days we are now living in are given light by what has happened before. We don't simply live against the distant backdrop of the biblical stories; we stand in a stream of living history, our faith receiving its substance through those who have gone before us. Matthew wants us to understand time not just as *chronos* - a succession of years, but as *kairos* - an unfolding of ages. And therefore to think of ourselves not just chronologically but, as it were, 'kairologically' - believing that each generation of the people of God carries a meaning, and can point to Jesus in its own unique way.

## Faith in the North

That is what I see happening with *Faith in the North*. Ever since I first heard about this project in May, I've been struck by the profound consonance between our story and these stories of faith on which the church in the North was built. It's like a finding a

piece of ancestral spiritual DNA – when you dig it up from the past, you discover what makes you who you are, and you’re reminded what has been lost and might be recovered.

Though we take our compass bearings from the New Testament, these figures from the North are “ours” in a particular way. They show us faith ‘here’ - rooted and real. Like us, as well as unlike us. Specifically they give us four great leadership lessons I’d like to briefly look at with you: courage in strategy; diversity in ecology; genius in the vernacular; brilliance in learning.

### **Courage in Strategy**

St Paulinus didn’t use Google Maps to plan his journey from Rome to Dewsbury, but if he had, it would look like this (see slide). He began in Rome, but he heard the call of Gregory to go north in 601AD. It was a bold gambit - an ambitious strategy to reach a forgotten borderland.

We really don’t know much about Paulinus. We have a sketchy physical description from Bede, and a kind of rough route map. But we know enough to know that he came. He was willing to embrace this courageous strategy. And, in a sense, the rest is history. It’s believed that he preached here in Dewsbury. We know he was able to start a ‘new worshipping community’ in York, and to build the first church structure there. We know he eventually evangelised King Edwin.

But the Google map doesn’t end there. As Dee has made clear, it was often “two steps forward, one step back”, or even “one step forward, and two steps back”. After 601, it took something like 24 years for the northern door to open, a further 3 patient years for the gospel opportunity to bear fruit; but within 6 years, by 633, the kingdom fragmented and Paulinus returned to the South. When we got the chance to choose the name for a new theological college, Paulinus didn’t stand a chance. He didn’t come from the north and didn’t stay! But in truth, his hand was forced. All local mission was

dependent on the ebb and flow of kingdoms. I wonder if, in fact, they had little choice but to spend less time 'watching the tide' of rising and falling popularity and more time just *following the gospel* wherever it went.

Of course, if the strategy had been less courageous, Paulinus would have been less exposed. But if the strategy had been less courageous, it would never have worked in the long-run like it did. The courage was the key.

It's a privilege of my job to travel round and see where the dioceses find themselves in terms of mission and strategy for the north. And though there is so much I am still learning, I can say this: we are not where we were. I remember being told by a Diocesan Bishop in front of all their clergy that their Diocese had no strategy and they were perfectly settled on that fact. But now every Diocese is seeking to move forward, not just at the level of courageous local parish ministry, which is always paramount; but also the kind of strategy that unlocks further local potential and draws in national resource. It makes me think this: If we can do this now, where could we be in seven years time? If dioceses can show strategic intent, what might be possible across the whole northern province?

### **Diversity in Ecology**

As earlier, we did briefly consider naming a theological college after Paulinus, but in the end, we went for Hild. If you can't name your college after a reformer, a holy Island, Jesus himself, or the resurrection, I think it's a good place to go. And one of the things that is most striking about Hild is this aspect of diversity. Hild was an outstanding example of empowered and empowering female leadership, which became a distinctive feature of northern Anglo-Saxon Christianity. This era represents a high watermark in female recognition and participation in leadership. In many ways, we would not see the like of this for at least another millennium across Western Europe. And it happened here.

So there was diversity in leadership, but also in structure. Hild ran a double monastery – for men and for women. So the structures themselves creatively juxtaposed difference within an overarching unity.

Hild stands at the meeting place of the Roman and the Celtic. Roman culture had its strong connections to mainland Europe and clear structures of power and authority; Celtic Christianity had its multiple centres of spirituality and a marked willingness to do mission alongside the communities it served. But it wasn't just these two - there were a range of influences from Europe and beyond. It really was a *cultural mixed ecology*. And this is further evident in the work a generation after Hild to produce the Lindisfarne Gospels. Professor Michelle Brown - whose talk from earlier this year can be found on the Faith in the North website, live today - describes this *mixed cultural ecology* in the most breathtaking terms. Here she speaks about the artistic design sponsored by Eadfrith:

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.

*What could that cultural mixed ecology look like today?* Sometimes it can feel like the strategic direction of travel is from south to north, or from London to the regions. But

what about the opposite? Where do we reverse the flow? Where do we, and where will we, lead in the North?

Related to that, I do wonder if we sometimes operate what might be called a “*straight line ecology*”. That is, the parish relates to the Diocese within a National framework – and the relationships run directly and vertically between them. But what examples might there be of a more mixed ecology? That is, more mutual, with different partners interconnecting in different ways? How, in the North, do we make these connections as fruitful as possible?

*What potential could we release by connecting in new ways?*

### **Genius in the Vernacular**

Here, Caedmon’s story is interesting. According to what we have, which is all from Bede, he was a Shepherd, advanced in years, unable to read or write. And when the time came to sing in his own language with others, he had no song to bring. But one night he has a dream. He is invited to sing about ‘the beginning of created things’, and...he does! When he wakes, he still sings, but his words are in the vernacular – in the language of ordinary people. He is brought to Hild, who sees his gift. She has scholars *come to him* and, because he can’t read or write, they have to read Scriptures and theology to him, so that he can turn it into the poetry of the people. In fact, we attribute to Caedmon one of the earliest pieces of verse in the whole English language.

Now, I think this story can be told in two ways. The one hand, you can be told as a story of condescension. God, in his mercy, and Abbess Hild in her wisdom, lift Caedmon up and bring him into the life of the monastery in a new way. Maybe that is part of it.

But there is another way to tell it. Because it seems to me that Caedmon is a genius. As God works through his unconscious mind, he is given powers of composition, and he becomes a key connecting node with the wider culture. It’s a declaration of impotence

on the part of Hild – she recognises here is someone who can do what her other monks cannot do. For all their learning, they are simply not able to capture what Caedmon can. And their refined languages can't achieve what Caedmon's songs can do. There is a genius in the vernacular.

At the Multiply conference in June, Bishop Justin Duckworth spoke about this. He said culture is always being generated in the wider world, but sometimes the church loses touch with culture and loses the capacity to express the gospel across the gap. At those moments, the Church needs to reconnect with culture through those who have genius in the vernacular, so that our mission is refreshed and our worship is regenerated. The point Justin made was that we need people like that today, and we need to resist the impulse to institutionalise them! Rather, *they* need to teach *us*.

Caedmon was not merely a trophy of grace; he was a cultural entrepreneur. Who now are the people now who have genius in the vernacular? In our estate communities? In the multi-lingual cities and towns of the north? In our digital worlds?

### **Brilliance in Learning**

Last of all we have is the great storyteller, Bede himself. I have to say, I never had a great deal of time for Bede. And, to be fair, for all his erudition, he wasn't the world's greatest fan of the British people, either. But increasingly I realise the magnitude of his scholarly achievement. Michelle Brown (speaking on Radio Four last week), captures it like this:

'He has the most incredible adventure in terms of his scholarship. He becomes responsible for us being called English. He becomes responsible for us being in the year 2023; he's a great social reformer and he's great scientist. His people went from being in the equivalent of the American Wild West within a generation or two to being a sort of nation with an identity and with laws and an ethical code.'

Radio 4, 1st Oct 2023

What an impact! And what a demonstration that a full-blooded revival of the gospel of God requires brilliance in learning.

This came through to me powerfully a few years ago in conversation with another theological college principal. He had just returned from a multidisciplinary conference, and had a very simple observation. The scientists, he said, were all excited about the future. "What would be discovered next?" But the theologians, he said, seemed rather depressed about the future, and taken up with arguments about the past! Bede points us to a Christianity confident in its intellectual heritage, and boldly hopeful in the God of all truth.

Strategically, I would add, this intellectual confidence includes placing our great Northern Colleges, new and old, alongside mission organisations, resource churches and dioceses as partners in bringing the gospel to the North - just as the tables today illustrate. How could we build on these partnerships in the coming years?

### **To Be a Northern Saint**

Finally, then, what is our task today? Surely it is to add our stories to these great stories so that, to use the words of Hebrews, only together with us would they be made perfect. Our job, following their example as they followed the example of Christ, is to be Northern Saints. To offer our discipleship and mission as a complement to theirs. With that in mind, I offer a final reflection and prayer:

What does it mean to be a Northern Saint?

*To carry a cross* - singing the salvation song in our mother tongue, taking the crossroad path to redemption.

*To walk the way* - going where we are sent, whether fortunes are fickle or fair, taking and meeting Christ on the road.

*To pray in the light* - words rising with the voice of creation; faces turned to the slow dawn and the open sky.

*To bind the broken* - tending the wounds of our history, calling down healing and challenging powers.

*To hear the word* - to hear and to teach, digging deep wells of wisdom for all.

*And to gather at the table* - coming home to heaven's banquet, ever convening collectives of hope, living now as a mosaic of love.

To be a Northern Saint.

Amen

