

# Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

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## Saints of Northumbria

by Dr John Arnold, our Anglican President

### Introduction

Although the north-East of England is now among the most secularised places in Europe (and therefore in the world) those saints are still alive in the minds and affection of the people in a way that is not true, for example, of Thomas Becket in Kent, where I now live. One of my favourite moments in the liturgical year, when I was Dean here, was starting the Annual Commemoration of Founders and Benefactors with the words: “First, we remember before you Edwin and Oswald, Kings of the Northumbrians.” It might strike us as strange that we should begin a roll-call of sanctity with kings, but that is to look at Christian history through the wrong end of a telescope and a much more individualistic and spiritualised view of sanctity than prevailed then in a tribal society, and in a more robust age, more concerned with primary evangelism, closer to untamed nature and to untamed human hearts.

**Bede**, one of the chief of the Northumbrian saints and the one from whom we learn almost all we know about the others, says of the early Anglo-Saxons: ‘Those who came to these shores were of the fiercest tribes of Germany, Angles, Saxons and Jutes.’ There is some scholarly dispute about this passage and about the identity of the Jutes, but the meaning is clear. Far from being peaceful settlers, the pagan Germanic invaders of Britannia were fiercer, more warlike and more cruel than, say, the Goths and the Vandals. England is the only country where the barbarians destroyed the Latin tongue, compared with the rest of Western Europe, where it survived in the Romance languages. They, together with the rugged terrain and rough weather on the northernmost outpost of Christendom, constituted a considerable challenge to a Christianity which had been formed in a milder, Mediterranean climate and civilisation, producing in the end exceptionally courageous and robust forms of saintliness.

He was born at Monkwearmouth near Sunderland in 672 AD and dedicated at the monastery there at the age of six to ‘the love of learning and the desire for God’. He never moved further than to a sister monastery at Jarrow, 12 miles away; but he had access to a good library and to teachers like Coelfrith and Benedict Biscop. Eventually he mastered the whole of ancient learning and became the greatest scholar in Europe, a redoubtable linguist and translator and what we would now call a scientist. His commentaries on Holy Scripture became part of the standard medieval curriculum; his establishing of the date of Easter led to the adoption of a common calendar, dating years forward and backward from the birth of Christ, AD and BC; and, through his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, he became not only the Father of English History but also the first modern historian, distinguishing between primary and secondary sources, between propaganda and fact. He is the Chronicler of the epoch-making Synod of Whitby 664 AD, at which the key point at issue was whether the English, by their adherence to the customs of the Celtic church, would be condemned to languish forever in a provincial and insular backwater, or whether by adopting Roman customs they would become part of a wider culture and

civilisation, in contact through communion with the Eastern Patriarchates not only with the whole of Europe but also with Africa and Asia, with the oikoumene or whole inhabited world as it was known at the time. Bede is a spokesman for the Roman option, but he is scrupulously fair and does not hide his admiration for the courage and piety of Oswald, Aidan and Hild, for example, compared with the vacillation and tactlessness of Augustine in Kent and Edwin in York later. He is a wonderful raconteur and his account of the conversion of Edwin (the sparrow flying through the hall and the High Priest Coifi riding up Goodmanham Lane hurling his spear against the idols), this is the best thing of its kind in Christian literature.

It is on his *Life of Cuthbert* that I draw in what I have to say about the best loved of all these saints.

**Cuthbert** was born about 638 AD and spent his childhood in northern Northumbria, probably near Edinburgh. He was of noble birth, and by all accounts a thoroughly normal if exceptionally strong, vigorous and attractive young man. He acquired the habits and disciplines of solitude through his work as a shepherd, like King David learning leadership by first mastering himself before leading others. Jesus was to use the image of a shepherd about his own leadership – with its need for personal courage and endurance and its mixture of care for the whole flock with concern for the one lost sheep.

Solitude is a hard test of character; it opens up faults, and many recluses become strange and wild and incapable of human relationships. Moreover, exposure to the elements and the need to defend lambs and oneself against wild animals does not necessarily lead to a love of nature and the ability to live in harmony with it. It is more likely to lead either to that fear and terror of the forces of nature and wild beasts which is common to all forms of paganism, including the Germanic paganism of Cuthbert's contemporaries, or to the attempt to dominate the natural environment and exploit it, which is typical of secular cultures like our own. The story of the sea otter warming his feet on the shore, even if legendary, is perfectly credible, like the stories of Jerome and the lion or St Sergius and the bear. Men and women who are at peace with God and themselves are capable of living in harmony with God's other creatures and with the creation itself. Of course Isaiah's vision of the lion lying down with the lamb is what we call eschatological; it looks forward to God's perfect kingdom which has not yet been fully established, but we need that vision and the example of the saints in order to move in the right direction.

St Mark records that Jesus was with the wild beasts, as a sign, a foretaste and an example of that coming kingdom, of which harmony between humankind and the environment will be a feature, not the only feature, but an essential one. Doubtless these few words in his Gospel were of comfort to early Christians, facing wild beasts in the arena, as they were 'butchered to make a Roman holiday'. It is the message of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ which gave content to Cuthbert's longing for solitude, for the wilderness and for the life of a hermit, and which distinguishes it from the self-indulgence of those who live alone because they cannot face the demands of human relationships on the one hand and the pathological flight into the alone of crazed fanatics on the other. Cuthbert did not seek solitude because he was unsuited to life in community. On the contrary, he prepared for his life as a hermit by long years as a monk. He was gregarious and had many friends, including women such as St Ebba. Stories of his aversion to women and legends attached to the bar of black marble in the floor of the cathedral, beyond which women were not allowed to go, belong to a later age and to a more narrow-minded and misogynistic form of monasticism than Cuthbert ever knew.

At the age of about thirty, the age at which John the Baptist and Jesus began their missions, Cuthbert became Prior of Lindisfarne on an island off the coast of Northumbria, which you should visit sometime, if you have not already done so. He took responsibility for the spiritual and bodily health of the other monks and continued to make journeys into the villages to preach the gospel. He lived a hard, self-denying life with much manual labour, and many stories were told of his endurance and exceptional physical strength and courage. These heroic qualities helped to commend the good news of Jesus Christ to the Germanic country folk, who admired Odin and Thor and Baldur and the other heroes of Asgard, and who could only be led by stages to appreciate the virtues of meekness and gentleness.

Cuthbert was also tender and affectionate. People brought their troubles and confessed their sins to him and he took them upon himself, weeping their tears with them, never condemning or scolding, without the slightest hint of priggishness or hypocrisy. This aspect of his life deepened during the years he spent as a hermit on the more desolate islands of the Farne, and it increased his likeness to the popular saints of Russia like St Sergius and the Elder Ambrose, with their clairvoyance about the need of the most hardened sinners to be loved, their generous sympathy, their ability to see sin as a form of suffering and to suffer with it. All the seventh century saints of Northumbria are saints of the undivided church, something we find useful in our dealings with Eastern Orthodoxy today.

It was only after he had served the community faithfully for about twelve years that he began to withdraw and then gradually, moving from one island to another, constructing a cell with an enclosure, becoming increasingly self-sufficient by having a well dug and even introducing barley as the one crop which would grow there. The point of the withdrawal and of the high wall was to avoid distraction, anything which might divert him from the heroic attempt to lead a truly human life, reconciled to God, his fellow men and women and the natural world.

Monasticism is a kind of laboratory for testing out particular theories about human life. Coenobitic monasticism has taught us lessons about life in community which could not have been learned in any other way. Eremitic monasticism, the life of hermits, is like one of those laboratories within laboratories, where especially dangerous experiments are carried out in highly controlled conditions on the frontiers of knowledge. It was experiential knowledge of the grace of God and of the human heart learned in extreme circumstances which made Cuthbert such an exceptional pastor and guide, healer and counsellor, to those who, troubled in mind and spirit, came to him in their hour of need.

It stood him in good stead when, much against his own inclination, he was prevailed upon to leave his island retreat to minister as Bishop of Lindisfarne to a church which was distracted and in need of saintly leadership. He was consecrated at York by Archbishop **Theodore**, a Greek from Tarsus who had come to Britain with a commission from the Pope in Rome. At the moment of his consecration the Greek East and the Celtic West, the Roman South and the Germanic North all come together in a way which is sacramental, both physical and spiritual, and which gives us an example of harmony in the past and the hope of reconciliation in the future. After only two years as bishop (but the ministry of Jesus lasted three years at most), his health began to fail and he returned to Lindisfarne to die, giving directions for his burial.

The day of his death was 20 March 687. His tomb became a place of pilgrimage and many miracles were reported at it.

Then in the ninth century marauding Danes made Lindisfarne unsafe. The monks took up the coffin, added other relics such as the head of King Oswald and the bones of St Aidan and set out on a wandering which took them first to Scotland, then to Chester-le-Street and then a hundred years later to Ripon. It was while they were attempting to return to Chester-le-Street that they came across the wooded peninsular in a bend in the River Wear which was to be the last resting place of the saint's body. Such was the veneration of the people of Northumbria for the best loved of their saints that the centre of church life was always there, where in his lifetime Cuthbert was to be found and, after his death, where his body lay. It still is. By a strange irony it was the love of the Northumbrians for this modest man and their faith in Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, which led to the building, first of a small Anglo-Saxon, then of a large Norman cathedral, the establishment of a mighty bishopric and the erection of a great castle.

Cathedral and castle are representations in stone of the relationship between church and state, one of the great unsolved questions bequeathed to us by the Middle Ages and indeed by our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's, without telling us which are which or what to do when they overlap. Luther had a good go at this with his theory of the Two Kingdoms.

## **Wilfrid**

Wilfrid did know what to do. He busied himself with the establishment of a church in England strictly on the Roman model, a church which would have its own power and possessions, its own dignity, laws and administration, over against those of the King. He is the chief representative among the northern saints of the tendency which was to prevail in Western Europe until the Reformation, namely the development of a supra-national Roman church as the successor to the Roman Empire. This brought immense benefits to the barbarian lands which were drawn into civilisation by the preaching of the Gospel. Another of the great Northumbrian saints, St **Willibrord**, had converted the Friesians just in time for Bede to record this astonishing achievement in his *History*. By missionary expansion the church made Europe, but in so doing it well nigh unmade itself as a church, (I am quoting from the distinguished Dutch ecumenist, Willem Visser 't Hooft), so closely did it become entangled in the worldliness of the world it had made. The Prince Bishopric of Durham is the most notable example in England of the confusion of spiritual and temporal power, which became more common in Germany and thus one of the causes of the Reformation.

Western Christendom was a region of converted barbarians. Only the Papacy had the prestige, the power and the ability to lead it; only the clergy was sufficiently well educated to administer it. When Anglo-Saxons like Wilfrid and Benedict Biscop visited Rome, they were dazzled and overawed. They wanted to be part of the splendour that was Rome, but more than that they wanted to be part of a universal society, to belong to something bigger, more sophisticated than the intensely local, tribal, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon churches, for all that they were so brave, lyrical and winsome. They could scarcely have known that Rome was not the only ecumenical model, though Theodore, of course, did. For Eastern Christendom was a converted civilisation with a Christian Emperor to govern it, well-educated, literate laymen to administer it, Byzantine court ceremonial to enhance its liturgy and the heritage of Graeco-Roman art to inform its music and iconography. Western Christendom is marked by

radical tensions and discontinuities, which make it so dynamic and restless; Eastern Christendom by harmonies and transformations which produce a quite different effect. We need both.

## Oswald and Aidan

And both are there in the Golden Age of Northumbria. Bede was a propagandist for the Roman model, but his honesty lets us glimpse the other, notably in Theodore, but also in King Saint Oswald, the Christian Emperor on a small scale, the paladin of faith, the Godly Prince *par excellence* and the forerunner of Alfred, Aethelflaeda, Athelstan and Edgar, who made the English into a nation under God.

Oswald, who was Anglo-Saxon, had been brought up in the Celtic church on the island of Iona. He was tall, brave, handsome, blond, the very image of a Germanic warrior king; but he wanted his people to share his faith and he sent to Iona for a missionary to help him. The first one was ineffectual, so he sent him back, and received in return the old and saintly Aidan. Aidan could only speak the Celtic language and he was too old to learn a new one, so Oswald translated for him. Before I was a priest I was an interpreter (I've even interpreted for Billy Graham in full flow), so you can understand why this means so much to me personally. Of all the scenes in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* the one I like best is that of the old, white-haired, Irish saint telling the good news of Jesus Christ to the rough pagan hill-folk of Northumbria with the young king beside him doing the work of a deacon, a humble servant of the word, not standing on his dignity nor exercising his prowess as a warrior, but simply ensuring that his people heard the Gospel in their own tongue from the lips of their own king. His head and some of the bones of Aidan lie together with the body of Cuthbert in his tomb in the Feretory.

If you go, as I hope you will, to Hadrian's Wall, try to visit Heavenfield. This is where Oswald and the Christian Northumbrians fought a decisive battle against the pagan Mercians, with their left flank covered by the ruined Roman Wall and the Cross planted on a small piece of rising ground to their right. Here you have the three ingredients which go to make up the Middle Ages, the remnants of empire, the vigour of barbarism and the Christian religion - just the three things which make Africa, for example, so dynamic today. The Mercians were soon converted peaceably by **St Chad**, as were the East Saxons by his brother **St Cedd**, two of the most attractive of the Northumbrian missionaries, of whom there were many.

## Hild

These, like most of the saints of Northumbria in its golden age, are all men. That is not surprising. After all, it was a warrior society, characterised by constant, internecine warfare between petty kingdoms, vying for supremacy. But women, at least women of royal or noble birth and widows, of whom there were many, could enjoy freedoms in Anglo-Saxon society, which were lost at the Norman conquest and only regained comparatively recently. And they could exercise leadership as abbesses, like Mildred in Thanet, Aetheldreda in Ely, Ethelburga in Barking and, above all **Hild** at Whitby.

She was born into Northumbrian royalty and after a tumultuous childhood was about to join her sister in France at the Abbey of Chelles, when she obeyed the call of Aidan and returned to Northumbria as Abbess, first of Hartlepool and then of Whitby, which she founded. Here she maintained the best traditions of Celtic monasticism in a

double house, where men and women lived in separate cottages but came together for worship. Thus she ruled not only over women but also over men. From my time as Dean of Rochester I recall witnessing the first passing-out parade (at the Royal School of Military Engineering) of women officers who would command male as well as female sappers – and that was in the 1980s. We had to wait another generation for women bishops in the Church of England.

Hild was a woman of remarkable character. Bede says: ‘All who knew her called her mother, because of her outstanding devotion and grace.’ Under her, Whitby produced five bishops, including two saints; and everyone, kings, bishops and the common people, came to her for advice. When it was time to convene a synod to settle, among other things, the date of Easter, King Oswiu of Northumbria chose Whitby for the administrative and diplomatic skills of its celebrated Abbess, the one person whose authority everyone acknowledged. Her acceptance, together with Cuthbert, against their own preference, of the Roman date and customs enabled the establishment of a single *Ecclesia Anglicana* or Church of England, which in turn enabled the eventual establishment of a single Kingdom of England.

When in 1999 the World Council of Churches launched a Decade of Women and Men in the Church we in Durham decided to do something about the almost exclusively male character of our cathedral. We commissioned a woman icon-painter to produce an icon of Hild, to be placed in the northernmost the Nine Chapels, now dedicated to her. She worked under the strictest discipline of Orthodox icon-painting and submitted her work to the judgment of her spiritual father. He rejected two of the vignettes surrounding the central figure. The first cause of offence was the depiction of the consecrated host. We readily accepted to have it painted out, not wishing to offend anyone unnecessarily. The second was the scene in which Hild is shown teaching the bishops. But, we said, this is for the celebration of the work of women in the church and, besides, Bede, who is a saint of the undivided church, explicitly states that, ‘the bishops came to Hild to be taught of her.’ Here, the Orthodox father graciously withdrew his objection; and I mention this as an example of modern ecumenical method and, indeed, of Hild’s continuing ability to reconcile..

She is also famed for her discovery and patronage of the talent of **Caedmon** (657 – 684), a simple lay brother at Whitby and the author of the oldest piece of connected poetry not only in English but in any Germanic language. She saw to it that he was instructed in Christian doctrine and piety, and rejoiced in his ability to render the faith in straightforward memorable verse. Here is a short example, taken from his *Hymn* :

Now we must honour the guardian of heaven  
The might of the architect, and his purpose...  
He first created for the children of men  
Heaven as a roof...  
Then the middle earth... (and)  
Afterwards appointed the lands for men.

Caedmon was never formally canonised, but was widely regarded as a saint. That seems to me enough to include him in this survey. Indeed, from the earliest times, before the Roman system developed, saints were simply people whom the local church delighted to honour, a good tradition which has been re-adopted by the Church of England in our day, and one which I intend to follow now in a brief resumé of the

## Saints of Northumbria since the Golden Age in the seventh century.

In the twentieth century Dean Alington was to write his great hymn for saints' days, 'God whose city's sure foundation/  
Stands upon his holy hill', which purports to be about Zion but is in fact about Durham. One verse goes: 'Some  
there were like lamps of learning/shining in a faithless night, /some on fire with love, and burning/with a  
flaming zeal for right, / some by simple goodness turning/ souls from darkness into light.'

A good example in the latter category is **Godric**, also never formally canonised. He was a rich merchant, who when widowed came to live as a hermit at Finchale, an idyllic spot a few miles north of Durham, where the cathedral priory later established a holiday home for its monks. Do go there if you can. The fact that he came from East Anglia is a sign of how successful had been the unification of Anglo-Saxon England; and the fact that he chose to seek solitude here may be a sign of the spiritual magnetism of Northumbria. He left a memory of simple goodness and humble sanctity. A local Roman Catholic parish church is dedicated to him.

As for 'lamps of learning', we are spoiled for choice. Two particularly attractive figures from the sixteenth century are Archdeacon **Bernard Gilpin** (known as 'the Apostle of the North') and Dean **William Whittingham**, the leader of the Marian exiles in Geneva and the chief translator of the Geneva Bible, in its day the most popular version in current use and the Bible of Shakespeare. It is a very good translation indeed and it was only superseded towards the end of the seventeenth century by the King James' Version, which drew heavily upon it. Among the reasons for its popularity was that it was so up to date – in quarto, rather than folio format, so that it could be carried about easily, and in Roman rather than Old English type which made it more readable.

They were followed by a stream of learned bishops, unparalleled in any other see: among them in the eighteenth century **Joseph Butler**, whose grandiloquent epitaph by Gladstone may be seen in the Quire, the New Testament scholars **Westcott** and **Lightfoot** in the nineteenth century, and **Michael Ramsey**, the priest-scientist **John Hapgood** and **David Jenkins** in the twentieth. Westcott and Jenkins were also characterised by 'a flaming zeal for right', in both cases on behalf of the Durham miners. They were following in the footsteps of **Granville Sharp**, son of Archdeacon Sharp and a leader of the abolitionist movement before Wilberforce and Clarkson. He was also the virtual founder of the state of Sierra Leone and a champion of many a good cause.

Now, if I were to write a romantic novel with a heroine who was beautiful, strong, courageous, modest and virtuous, who died young and was called **Grace Darling**, you might think I wanted to be published by Mills and Boon. But she really existed and I cite her as an example of everyday, feminine and Northumbrian piety. Born in Bamburgh in 1815, the daughter of a lighthouse keeper, she grew up on the Farne Islands and came to fame for her heroic contribution to the saving of passengers from the wreck of the *Forfarshire* in 1838. She was unmoved by celebrity and died of TB in 1842 at the age of 26. She was buried in a modest grave at St Aidan's Church in Bamburgh but a more elaborate monument was added later and a museum opened quite recently. Again, worth a visit.

Thanks to the sanctity of the shrine of Cuthbert and the tomb of Bede, Durham Cathedral had a policy of refusing, if possible, to house monuments and was thus saved the fate of Westminster Abbey as the Valhalla of the Nation or at least the North.. One notable exception is the Chapel of the **Durham Light Infantry**, with its simple

wooden cross placed on an old ammunition box. The other is the **Miners'** Memorial, with its moving inscription. Almost every church in County Durham has two memorials, one to those who fell in the wars, the other to 'the men and boys of this village, who died in the pit.' You, who pass by, remember them.

Every year I used to conduct the annual service for the **Mothers' Union**, climb into the Nave pulpit and look out over a sea of white hair, the Mothers' Union now being at least partly a Grandmothers' Union. And before I welcomed them I would pause and have to hold back my tears, as I reckoned just how much toil and sorrow, how much faith and hope and love was gathered there. I was reminded of the story of the visitor to the Soviet Union who said to a young Russian bishop, "I see that your churches are full of old women. What will happen when they are gone?" The bishop smiled through his beard and said, "There will be more old women." After the captains and the kings, the saints and scholars, the champions and the evangelists have departed, of such are the saints of Northumbria, in a sense which is closer to the use of the word in the New Testament than perhaps it has become in the course of ecclesiastical history.

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