

NORTHERN SAINTS - HILD

(Ephesians 4.1-16 and Matthew 5.14-16)

Today we continue our series on Northern Saints with St. Hild. Where I lived as a child in Middlesbrough I looked up to St. Hilda's Church - very appropriate to have as a patron such a strong women in such a male dominated society. She has followed me throughout my life - to school at Hartlepool and later at St. Hild's College at Durham University. What an inspiration she has been.

Hilda was born in the Kingdom of Northumbria near what is now Leeds in 614. Her father was killed before she was born. Britain in 614 was a violent unstable place with forced marriage, slavery, revenge attacks and frequent changes of leadership endemic. ever since the Romans left two hundred years previously. Although relatively few people lived in Britain the country had many kingdoms and tribes with different languages and beliefs all attempting to seize power and was open to yet more tribes from the continent, from Ireland and Scotland. Hilda herself was an Anglian who arrived at Saltburn in 550 AD from Denmark. The incoming tribes and many of the native inhabitants were pagan, believing in many unfriendly spirits and gods that needed placating with gifts including human sacrifices. This included our local tribe the Brigantes. Ireland and the western parts of Britain had been partially Christianised for at least 300 years but not mainstream. They recognised the Pope but their organisation came from the east. The Roman system of central control and bishops fixed to areas didn't fit with a rural tribal society. Instead the church was organised around small family groups often with a woman in charge. These monasteries became great centres of study and craftsmanship.

When Hilda was two her great uncle Edwin killed Aethelfrith king of Northumbria and became king. Aethelfrith's sons fled into Northern parts. Does this sound familiar? Hilda with her elder sister and mother moved into Edwin's court. Edwin proved to be a strong king. He married Ethelburga sister of the king of Kent who was Christian - converted when the Pope sent missionaries to Kent. Ethelberga brought her with her priest/bishop Paulinus and his translator James the deacon when she moved north.

Edwin eventually became Christian and was baptised at York in 627 with members of his household including Hilda then aged 13. The Pope hoped Paulinus would become Bishop at York. Unfortunately Edwin was killed by a British king Cadwallon five years later and much revenge killing followed.

Paulinus took Ethelburga and the royal family and escaped by rowing boat to Kent. Hilda then 18 and probably married and maybe with children remained behind as did James the Deacon - possibly at Stanwick. James taught many to chant and sing the psalms. This must have meant Hilda as well. Difficult times!

The sons of Edwin's predecessor Aethelfrith returned from their exile in Scotland to take back the crown. In Scotland they lived at the Irish monastery on Iona and had converted to Christianity. Oswald fought and killed Cadwalla at Heavenfield near Hexham and made his palace at Bamburgh. Oswald sent to Iona for an evangelist and when Aidan came as bishop he gave him the Island of Lindisfarne.

Are there any parallels with today? Well yes there are. How about Libya, Somalia, Sudan and other places? And with Hilda - first generation Christian often on the wrong side of any conflict. Men absent. Hilda learnt the faith praised God and brought up her family.

In 641 Aidan established a monastery at Lindisfarne and Hartlepool and a Briton called Heiu became abbess. Hilda came to a crossroad in her life - alone without a house with a vocation to be nun brought up to be a Roman Christianity. She decided to join her sister in a monastery in France. Sometimes we can't see the wood for the trees. Aidan gave her some advice. Being a nun was right but France was wrong. Aidan asked her not to go and gave her a place to live on the north bank of the Wear and trained her as an Irish nun. Here Hilda learned how to run a little community. When Heiu moved elsewhere Hilda became Abbess at Hartlepool and at 33 started the second part of her life.

This what the Lord says, 'Stand at the crossroads and look. Ask for the ancient paths. Ask where the good way is and walk in it and you will find rest for your soul.'

The monastery at Hartlepool was near the present church in which was then an island like Lindisfarne. The monks and nuns lived separately in small wooden houses clustered round larger communal buildings all inside a boundary wall. Worship, prayer and education were central to the rule of the monastery and also involved the wider community. The monastery was an Irish foundation but Hilda included the singing and discipline and beauty she had learned from the Roman tradition. Her monastery was also in a closer relationship with the wider community. Hilda was innovative.

In 654 when she was 40 Hilda unexpectedly became foster mother to Eanfled Queen Ethelburga's year old granddaughter. God sometimes asks us to do surprising things. This little girl took over Hilda's role when she died. The monastery was truly a family.

A year later Hilda established a new bigger monastery on the cliff at Whitby then called Streanaeshalch on the same lines as at Hartlepool. Both Hartlepool and Whitby became centres of learning and worship. Bede describes her as teaching the observance of righteousness, mercy, purity and other virtues, but especially of peace and charity - a great contrast to life elsewhere. The philosophy followed by Hilda was that in the community no one was rich, no one was needy for everything was held in common. She followed the command of Jesus to let her light shine.

It was said about Hilda that so great was her prudence that not only ordinary folk but also kings and princes came to ask her advice and take it. At the heart of the monastery though was the worship and the singing and music she had learned from James the Deacon. Those

under her direction were required to make a thorough study of the Scriptures and occupy themselves in good works. And this emphasis on education As a result of this some of her monks became priests and five men became bishops including the saintly John of Hexham and Beverley and Wilfred the great exponent of Roman Christianity.

Because of Hilda's profound belief that everyone was equally important to God and each person had God given gifts that should be encouraged it was from Whitby that the first English poet emerged. This was Caedmon who was a cowherd on the estate. Hilda brought him into the monastery he was taught to read at the school and he then joined the community as a monk and helped to use his gift.

It was also at Whitby that the great Synod was held that decided that Britain should adopt the Roman style of Christianity. Hilda hosted this synod and accepted its decisions

Hild didn't go out and preach the gospel or do great acts. Her vocation was to encourage and teach others to do this. Her role was to provide a secure base a home for those on the Christian journey. No wonder that she was called Mother by all.

1. When life is tough keep the faith.
2. Test your vocation and ask for advice and act on it.
3. Be confident and let your light shine.
4. Be prepared to take on unexpected challenges.
5. Give encouragement to others along the way.
6. Keep God at the centre of all you do with prayer and worship and study

St. Hilda of Hartlepool & Whitby

Caedmon's Poem

Praise we the Fashioner
now of Heaven's fabric
The majesty of his might
and his mind's wisdom,
Work of the world-warden,
worker of all wonders,
How he the Lord of Glory everlasting,
Wrought first for the race of men
Heaven as a rooftree,
Then made he Middle Earth
to be their mansion.

St. Hilda's Legacy

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6. Keep God at the centre of all you do with prayer
and worship and study