

# **NORTHERN SAINTS - BEDE**

*(1 John 1.1-7 and Matthew 13.31-33, 52)*

If you go into Durham Cathedral turn right at the entrance and go into the Galilee Chapel and pay your respects at the tomb of the Venerable Bede.

Bede was born near Sunderland in 673 to estate workers to an ordinary family - not nobility. He was born 10 years after the Synod of Whitby decided that Britain should adopt the Roman style of Christianity. Britain now had an Archbishop of Canterbury selected by Rome. Theodore of Tarsus was a brilliant choice - he came from the East and spoke Greek. At Monkwearmouth Benedict Biscop was building a new Roman monastery.

At seven years old Bede was brought to Monkwearmouth priory by his parents who dedicated him to God. It was almost unheard of for a boy from an ordinary family to enter the monastery. There must have been something special about Bede and there was. Benedict Biscop and a man called Ceolfrith took charge of the child.

For Bede Monkwearmouth must have seemed a magical place. It was built of stone and adorned with paintings and glass in its windows - the first time seen in Britain; so different from the simple wooden Celtic monasteries. And then there was the singing and the liturgy - and the discipline. John the Cantor taught the monks to sing the Psalms and hymns in Gregorian chant antiphonally. Everything was in Latin. Each day those in the monastery spent 2 hours at study, 7 hours working, 7 worship services plus another service at 2am and Mass. Everything was ruled by the bell.

Bede soaked it all up. He was very intelligent and a gifted musician. He quickly learned Greek from Benedict Biscop and Latin from Ceolfrith. He learned the Psalms by heart and loved them. When he was nine he moved with 16 others and Ceolfrith to found a monastery at Jarrow and there he was there until his death.

Our Gospel reading today is Jesus' parable about God's Kingdom being like the mustard seed that grew into a large bush in the barren desert of Palestine. The monastery at Jarrow was trying to become a seed for God in a Godless place. Just one or two people can grow God's kingdom.

Bede and Ceolfrith were once the only ones holding the fort for God. Plague broke out when Bede was about 13. It killed all the monks at Jarrow and many at Monkwearmouth. Only Ceolfrith and Bede were left at Jarrow and they sang all the services until Benedict from Rome returned. Maybe this event convinced Bede that the worship of God was central to everything. Bede was ordained as deacon when he was 19 and priest at 27 and became more responsible for the worship. 'I know that the angels visit the canonical hours. What if they should not find me there among them? Will they not say, 'where is Bede - why does he not come to the devotions prescribed for the brethren?' Are we aware that we join

the whole company of heaven when we worship God? In order to help others better worship God he condensed the Psalms to make them easier to learn and because he knew that others found Latin difficult he translated some into English. For Bede music was an essential part of worship. He was a singer and musician who wrote over 100 hymns.

After worship Bede regarded his vocation was to help those he taught grow in their faith. He studied the many books in the monastery, preached and wrote 40 full books and a number of sermons and letters. Most of his books were commentaries on the Bible. On the wall above his tomb is a quotation from his book on Revelation. It reads 'Christ is the Morning Star who when the night of this world is past will bring his saints to the promise of the light of life and everlasting day.'

About his studies Bede reveals just how responsible he feels for his pupils. He said, 'I cannot have my children learning what is not true and losing their labour on this after I have gone'.

One of the subjects Bede taught was mathematics. This was needed in order to calculate the date of Easter but it was also needed when the Bible was studied and Bede worked out a chronology of events and worked out how long had passed since the birth of Jesus. One of Bede's books is entitled 'On the Nature of Time'. Bede, studies went further than the church Jarrow was situated on a creek of the Tyne a busy trading harbour. It was a bit like being on the M1 because people travelled more by sea than by land. Unlike many Bede knew that the earth was a globe and he understood about lines of latitude and how they were used and measured and used by sailors. He understood what caused tides and measured them at Jarrow in order to help the sailors navigate the river and sea. This he regarded as his Christian duty because he had been given this gift as a mathematician from God and must use it to help his fellows.

Bede had great intellect and he certainly benefitted from the new Roman style of being church but increasingly Bede is unhappy about the state of the church. Bede wasn't an aristocrat and he hadn't forgotten that. He saw that the church was developing elite, a privileged class. What was happening to those from the villages and hamlets in the dense woodlands and high places who weren't being reached by the church? Latin was not understood by most so were excluded from faith. The Celtic church represented by Aidan, Hilda and Cuthbert gave priority to the poor and faith came from where they were. The Roman church imposed on the people from the elite down. Bede was saddened by the greedy and lax attitude of the clergy. Is this how we appear to those outside the church.

He went to York to see Egbert the first Archbishop of York and was a pupil of Bede to express his worries. He then researched the history of those who brought the Gospel to the north from the west. So he became the first person to write a history of the English speaking world. All we know of this time comes from Bede. The third action he took was to set out to translate parts of the Bible into English. And he continued with this until moments before he died.

To sum up this man with his enormous intellect: he was passionate about worship about studying the Bible and sharing this knowledge with others at their level of understanding not his. He teaches us to view our talents as gifts from God and to use them to the glory of God. It's really discipline, discipline, discipline, and taking our faith seriously. Maybe we could start by learning a few Psalms by heart by repeating them every day as Bede did.

'I pray you noble Jesus, that as you have graciously granted me joyfully to imbibe the words of your knowledge, so you will also of your bounty grant me to come at length to yourself, the fount of all wisdom and to dwell in your presence for ever.'

We all have tremendous resources and talents given by God to help build up his kingdom. Let us resolve that everything we do be to his glory and let us re-discover the immensity of worshipping God.