

SAINT CUTHBERT

(Genesis 2.18-20 and Matthew 6.25-33)

This is the Eaglescliffe Newscasting Service. The main news, today 21st March, is the death of our beloved Bishop Cuthbert, yesterday, 20th March in the year of our Lord 687.

We will be bringing you interviews, on the spot recordings and the background story.

Bishop Cuthbert, who only two years ago became the Bishop of Lindisfarne, shortly afterwards had to retire through ill health. He relinquished his post and went to live on one of the Farne Islands. There he made his home in stark poverty.

Due to his hard work and zeal he eventually burned himself out. With suffering, solitude and contemplation he yielded up his spirit in the hours of the night. The monks, who had been allowed to stay with him in his holy home, went out and lit torches to signal to the brethren that the venerable father had passed away.

He was buried yesterday, 20th March, the same day that he had died in accordance with the custom.

We can now take you over to our man on the spot, Herefrith, who will keep us informed of the events. Herefrith, what news can you give us?

That was the first part of an old fashioned audio-visual event, which I was involved in, to mark the 1300th anniversary of St. Cuthbert's death. It went on, using a slide projector and tape recording, to take the audience through the whole of Cuthbert's life, bringing out the simplicity of his lifestyle and his response to God's direction.

It is possible that he had royal connections and he was certainly intelligent, but he chose to be a shepherd. Our first reading from Genesis takes us back to God's creation of, and man's relationship with, animals and we can picture

Cuthbert enjoying the outdoor life, looking after the sheep but relating to other animals too. The love of a simple life of austerity was a characteristic which was apparent in his lifestyle, even when he became a bishop.

Unlike many of his fellow shepherds he spent a lot of time in prayer and it was when at prayer in the country about two miles below Melrose, that he saw a vision of angels carrying up to heaven a globe of fire which Cuthbert somehow knew was the soul of some great man. He only discovered a few days later that St. Aidan had died at that very time.

Perhaps it was this experience which made him feel that he should live a solitary God-centered, contemplative, life. Probably after doing some compulsory military service, he had two goes at this, one in a cave near Doddington and one in the Kyloe Hills near Lindisfarne. But then he felt called to become a monk and became a brother at Melrose Abbey under Prior Boisel where (to quote again from the audio visual presentation):

...he was more diligent in reading, working, watching and prayer than brothers who had been with us all their lives. He also drank no strong liquor and the only thing he could not abstain from was food, and this he said was lest he become unfit to do the necessary labour that our Lord had in store for him.

Bishop Eata took Cuthbert with him from Melrose to Ripon to help found the monastery there. Back at Melrose after that, Cuthbert became the Prior there following Boisel's death. He was persuaded to become Bishop of Hexham in 684 but in the very next year swapped with the Bishop of Lindisfarne - somewhere much more remote in keeping with his love of nature and solitude.

As I wrote those words I had a somewhat errant thought of Pete Wilcox, formerly a curate at All Saints' and recently made Bishop of Sheffield, texting Bishop Paul at Durham – *Hey, Paul, I fancy a really old cathedral, how about a swap?* Perish the thought: let's get back to Cuthbert.

Even what we might think of as the fairly light episcopal duties at Lindisfarne were not for him and after about eighteen months he resigned and went to live in a hermitage on one of the inner Farne Islands - about one and half

miles off the Northumberland coast opposite Seahouses. He never returned to the mainland.

He continued in prayer and contemplation, often walking by the sea, visited from time to time by the monks from Lindisfarne. As he became ill and weaker and weaker those visits became more frequent. The monks pressed him to eat more and brought food for him.

One story, perhaps apocryphal but in keeping with his simple nature, is about his reply when being pressed to eat more. He produced a few onions from his covering with the explanation: *These have been my food for the last five days. As often as my mouth was parched and burning though excessive dryness and thirst, I sought to refresh myself by tasting these.*

Let's pause there.

So do not worry saying 'what shall we eat' or 'what shall we drink' or 'what shall we wear?' Your heavenly father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.

Words of Jesus from our gospel reading. You'll remember that they come in a passage where Jesus talks about nature - birds and flowers. He compares the beauty of flowers to - that wonderful phrase - Solomon in all his splendour. And Solomon loses out to the flowers.

I wonder if that reading from St. Matthew's gospel was a favourite of Cuthbert. We have seen how he loved to be with God in God's created world - when he was a shepherd, when he was alone in the Doddington Caves and in the Kyloe Hills, when he walked by the sea. There is an unauthenticated story that once when he had been walking in the shallows and came up on to the sand two furry creatures came, licked his feet and dried them with their fur before going back into the sea.

We have seen his dedication to prayer and just being with God.

We have seen too where his priorities lay. How he had no time for anything but the bare necessities of life – confident that God would provide and guide.

A fortnight ago John Greenwood talked about St. Aidan. He described the pattern of Aidan's life as withdrawing from time to time from the busyness of life to be alone with God and seek his will away from the distractions of the world.

We heard last Sunday how St. Hilda had a rather adventurous life, moving about all over the country. Not for her the quiet contemplative life. She was a people person, an organiser, a leader. But she too was confident in God's direction and provision.

Where do I stand in relation to reliance on God and not on the attractions which our society dangles before us all? Where do you stand? Where do I stand in asking God what he wants of me and following his direction? Where do you stand? Are we to be Cuthberts or Aidans or Hildas or something different again? What are our priorities? Are they God's or are they those of society in general? Do we trust God and rely on him?

Important questions thrown up by a study of our northern saints so far. Let me tell you a little story which says something in an amusing way about all those questions and the right approach to them. It is based on the account in Genesis 22 of Abraham being told by God to sacrifice his son and at the last minute being told instead to sacrifice a nearly ram. I apologise in advance to those not familiar with computers.

And it came to pass after these things that God did test Avraham. And God said to him 'Avraham' and Avraham replied 'hineni – here I am'. And God said 'take your computer, your old computer, your 286 and install upon it an operating system, Windows 98, which I will show to you' And Avrahm rose up early in the morning and saddled his ass. He loaded his computer, his old computer, his 286, on the ass. And he took two of his young men with him and Yitzchak his son. And he rose up and went to the place where God had told him; there to find Windows 98. Then on the 3rd day Avraham lifted his eyes and saw windows 98 from afar. And Avraham said to his young men,

'Stay here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and load Windows 98 on our 286, and come again to you.'

And Avraham took his computer, his old computer, his 286 and laid it on Yitzchak his son. And they went both of them together. And Yitzchak spoke to Avraham, his father, and said 'My father'. And he replied 'Hineni, here I am my son'. And Yitzchak said 'Windows 98 requires far more memory than the 286 has. How will it possibly run on your machine?' And Avraham looked at his son, his only son, whom he loved; and he shook his head slowly and in perfect faith and with unswerving trust and belief in the Almighty, he said 'Fear not, Yitzchak, my son, God will provide the necessary RAM.'

Back, now, to Cuthbert and what happened after his death. He was buried on Lindisfarne and it is said that 10 years later the monks there, moving the body, found it still fresh and uncorrupted.

About 100 years later Viking raiders destroyed the monastery at Lindisfarne though Cuthbert's tomb was untouched. The monks took his body through Northumbria until they got to Chester-le-Street where it remained for 110 years. More Viking raids caused it to be moved yet again ending up at Ripon. After a couple of months it was on the move again - towards the north. The cart carrying the body got firmly stuck in the mud. It was near what came to be called Durham and was re-buried where Durham Cathedral now stands.

In 1104 the building of the cathedral was virtually complete, monks inspecting the coffin found the body was still uncorrupt. It was eventually placed behind the high altar and the shrine remains there today for you to visit.

Let me finish with some words from John Newman, an important church leader in the late 19th century. I think St. Cuthbert would have endorsed them and hope that each of you may find them helpful in your own life.

God has created me to do him some definite service.

He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission.

I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.

He has not created me for naught; I shall do good – I shall do his work;
I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place
While not intending it - if I do but keep his commandments.
Therefore I will trust him.
Whatever I am I can never be thrown away.
If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve him.
In perplexity, my perplexity may serve him.
If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve him.
He does nothing in vain.
He know what he is about.
He may take away my friends, he may throw me among strangers.
He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me.
Still – he knows what he is about.