

ST. CUTHBERT, THE PEACEMAKER

Teresa Di Biase, St. Augustine in the Woods, 21 May 2017

LET US PRAY

Father above us;

Son beside us;

Spirit within us;

The Three all around us.

AMEN

It is the year 650. A young man is watching a flock of sheep on the hillside at night. All his companions are asleep, and he is praying. Suddenly a great stream of light breaks through the sky, and the young man sees a choir of angels descending to earth, then returning to heaven and taking with them a soul of exceeding brightness. Waking his companions, the lad urges them to join him in praising God for the extraordinary event. The next morning he learns who has died. It is Bishop Aidan of Lindisfarne. The young man is Cuthbert, and although he has never known Aidan, he dedicates his life to serve as a monk like the holy bishop.

Of all the Celtic saints, I think my favorites are Aidan and Cuthbert. They have a winsomeness that shines through the layers of holy legend that have come to surround them. Of the two, Cuthbert has the most stories attached to him, and the most miracles. He is the preeminent saint of the North, that is, the north of England, and each year over a half-million people visit his shrine at Durham cathedral, just as some of us from this parish have done on the Celtic pilgrimages Frank and I have led.

Cuthbert was a healer. There are many miracles of physical healing attributed to him, but it is his ability to heal a broken spirit, whether of an individual or a community, that testifies most strongly to me of his sanctity. Before I turn to the story that Frank read to you this morning, let me briefly relate a couple more stories that give you a sense of the man and his gifts.

After the experience of seeing Aidan's soul taken up to heaven, Cuthbert sought admission to a nearby monastery at Melrose, and there he spent a number of years except for a short period of time when he was sent to Ripon, a daughter house of Melrose, to serve as guest master. Finally he was chosen to be Prior at Lindisfarne itself, under circumstances I shall explain in a minute. At Lindisfarne his wisdom, humility and mercy were exactly what that community needed. The Venerable Bede, who wrote a Life of Cuthbert based on interviews he conducted with people who had known him, puts it this way:

[Cuthbert] readily challenged wrongdoers because of his thirst for justice, but his gentleness made him quick to forgive penitents. Often he would be the first to burst into tears, tears of compassion as they were pouring out their sins. Though he himself did not need to do so, he would show them how to make recompense for their sins by doing the penance himself.

Elsewhere Bede describes how people would come to Cuthbert hoping for a word of consolation to help them live their lives under difficult circumstances. They were not disappointed, Bede testifies. “No one left unconsolated; no one had to carry back the burdens with which he or she had come.” When I first read these words many years ago, I thought to myself, “That is the kind of person I want to be.”

You might think that with these qualities, everyone would love Cuthbert. Ironically, it was at Lindisfarne where Cuthbert met strong opposition. To understand what that was about, I need to tell you the story of the Synod of Whitby.

The Synod took place in 664 at the behest of King Oswy of Northumbria, the son of King Oswald who had first invited Aidan and the Irish monks of Iona to evangelize his kingdom. King Oswy’s wife came from southern England which had been evangelized by Christians from the continent, including St. Augustine of Canterbury. These Christians, together with the rest of the Roman-influenced Church, celebrated Easter on a day different from the Celtic Christians, who followed the way of the Eastern Church. Oswy called together representatives of each side to put forth their case as to which was the one correct practice that should be followed. The Celtic side was represented by Bishop Colman of Lindisfarne, and the Roman way was argued by a young up-and-coming cleric named Wilfrid.

At stake was more than the celebration of the Church's major feast; it was really about whether the largest kingdom in England would re-orient itself to the ecclesiastical ways of the continent of Europe or continue to be aligned with Ireland. The report of the Synod comes to us from Bede, and he is clearly on the Roman side. But it's interesting to note that his portrayal of Wilfrid is not entirely sympathetic. First Wilfrid brags about his greater knowledge of the customs of the church than the insular Irish. Wilfrid says:

Our Easter customs are those that we have seen universally observed in Rome ... we have also seen the same customs generally observed throughout Italy and Gaul when we travelled through these countries for study and prayer ... The only people who are stupid enough to disagree with the whole world are these [Irish] and their obstinate adherents the Picts and Britons, who inhabit only a portion of these two islands in the remote ocean.

To this charge Colman of Lindisfarne replies, referring to the Apostle John:

It is strange that you call our customs stupid when they rest on the authority of so great an Apostle, who was considered worthy to lean on our Lord's breast, and whose great wisdom is acknowledged throughout the world.

Wilfrid hastily responds that he didn't mean to disparage John, then launches into a complicated explanation of why St. John was wrong and St. Peter was right in calculating the date of Easter. But soon Wilfrid gets really nasty. As Colman appeals to the authority of one holy man after another in support of the Celtic way, including St.

Columba himself, the founder of the mother house of Iona, Wilfrid sneers as he cites Scripture:

And with regard to your Father Columba and his followers, whose holiness you imitate and whose rules and customs you claim to have been supported by heavenly signs, I can only say that when many shall say to our Lord at the day of judgement: "Have we not prophesied in Thy name, and cast out devils, and done many wonderful works?" the Lord will reply, "I never knew you."

Can't you hear the gasps around the room as Wilfrid insults the pillars of the Celtic church? It doesn't help when Wilfrid assumes a posture of magnanimity as he continues, "Far be it from me to apply these words to your fathers, for it is more just to believe good rather than evil of those whom one does not know."

In the end, Wilfrid carried the day and the king agreed that henceforth his realm would follow the Roman way. Thus begun a period when the Celtic way was pushed aside: bishops who had followed the Irish way were removed and replaced by Roman adherents, Celtic monasteries were compelled to adopt the Roman tonsure -- it was a time of bitterness and animosity. When Colman and the majority of the monks of Lindisfarne left for Ireland because they could not accept the new order, Cuthbert was sent to pick up the pieces.

Cuthbert himself likely favored the Celtic way, and he had no reason to feel kindly toward Wilfrid, who at one point had taken over the monastery at Ripon and kicked out

Cuthbert and his prior, until Wilfrid quarreled with the king and was himself replaced. But now Cuthbert was being sent to make the best of a bad situation at Lindisfarne.

Bede's report of what happened next is the substance of Frank's reading this morning. Unlike some of saint's stories which modern-day hearers may have difficulty taking at face value, I find this one easy to accept. Here we have a picture of a man who does not press his authority but leads by example. Each day Cuthbert convened the monks and calmly and with good humor presented his suggested way to overcome the divisions that were racking the community. At the beginning no one listened and when the meeting degenerated into argument, Cuthbert would smile and leave, only to begin again the next day. What extraordinary patience Cuthbert demonstrated! Bede doesn't say how long the process of reconciliation took, but he definitely doesn't claim that it happened in a miraculously short period of time. I believe it finally came to pass because everyone – those who accepted the changes brought by the Synod of Whitby and those who opposed them – felt truly listened to by their leader Cuthbert. The man who had spent his life listening to and caring about the troubles of others modeled how to live fearlessly and compassionately in a time of discord.

Maybe you wonder if the differences between the factions at Lindisfarne were papered over, so to speak, only to resurface after Cuthbert was out of the picture. It is true that there was a brief period after Cuthbert's death when Wilfrid, who in many ways was the antithesis of all that Cuthbert and Lindisfarne stood for, temporarily took charge. Bede

hints darkly that it was a time of great difficulty for the Lindisfarne Community. But that time passed and years later we find evidence of the lasting change that Cuthbert's presence effected.

Part of this evidence appears in the Lindisfarne Gospels, an 8th century manuscript containing images which we see in Celtic display in our foyer. The Gospels were likely the work of a single scribe, a monk of the Lindisfarne community, and they were dedicated to God and to St. Cuthbert, who had died a decade or two previously, after serving as Prior of Lindisfarne and as a bishop, as well as living for many years as a hermit on an island near Lindisfarne.

An English calligrapher and former monk named Ewan Clayton wrote a book a few years ago about the Lindisfarne Gospels that I always recommend to our pilgrims. In it he shows the various influences at work in the lettering and decoration of the Gospels, ranging from Celtic and Anglo-Saxon in the British Isles to places as far away as Coptic Egypt. Clayton makes the point that the Lindisfarne manuscript is not a Celtic book as opposed to a Roman one, nor is it a mere mishmash of styles. Instead, it transcends differences and creates something new. The scribe was making a visual statement concerning the various streams of Christianity present in Northern England, and his manuscript was consciously stating a unified position beyond the divisions that threatened the church of the day. Clayton also says that the resilience of the Lindisfarne community after it was subjected to repeated Viking raids in the 9th century

demonstrates these “People of St. Cuthbert,” as they came to be called, had taken their beloved leader’s message of unity to heart.

Now, you all may be wondering, what is the point in all this, and what does it have to do with the Gospel reading I chose for today, the Beatitudes from the Gospel of Matthew? Throughout the Lindisfarne Gospels certain texts are highlighted, usually because of their prominence in the church’s calendar, but in some cases it is thought that the scribe believed they were evocative of Cuthbert’s own gifts and insights. The Matthean Beatitudes is one of those specially decorated passages which perhaps put the scribe in mind of Cuthbert. Think back to the days of strife at Lindisfarne when Cuthbert, with patience and forbearance, endured abuse as he worked to bring peace and reconciliation, even when he was mourning with those who saw their cherished Celtic ways overthrown by a new Roman order. And think now to our own present, our bitterly divided country, when it seems that there is no way forward past all that drives us apart. Do we hunger and thirst for righteousness? How can we be peacemakers? How do we show mercy? Cuthbert, who lived so many centuries ago yet is alive today in Christ, can help point the way.

Basically, I’m asking some of the same questions that Nigel asked recently in the St. Augustine’s electronic news. I want to be clear: the peace that Cuthbert fostered in the divided community at Lindisfarne was no easy peace, it was hard won. And it was absolutely grounded in Cuthbert’s deep life of prayer and spiritual discipline. As I

mentioned earlier, after his time at Lindisfarne Cuthbert spent years as a hermit on a small island off the coast of northern England. And even when he was the leader of his community he was known, like Aidan before him, to spend entire nights in prayer, standing in the sea. Only because Cuthbert faced his own inner demons could he be a means of healing for others.

Recently I was reminded of the connection between prayer and peace-making when I read the reflection by Tom Ewell, a Whidbey Island Quaker, that appeared in the latest issue of The Light. Tom affirms that for him, a critical part of living faithfully in these uncertain times has to do with engaging ever more deeply and regularly in his faith practice. “I need to have a sense of the transcendent in my life,” he says, “especially at this time. I need to believe there is a ‘force more powerful’ at work to bring justice and peace beyond my ability to recognize and understand how it is working and to find my place in the historical moment I am living. Toward this end I will strengthen my faith through prayer, common worship, and the regular practice of awe and joy.”

In the past four weeks Frank and I have been privileged to share with you something of our understanding of Celtic Christianity and of the men and women who embody its particular gifts and values. A strong sense of the Divine in all creation, an emphasis on the importance of spiritual companioning or soul friendship, the recognition of women’s gifts and leadership, a deep grounding in prayer – all these and more are treasures that

Celtic Christianity has to offer us. May we continue as a congregation to experience these treasures in the months and years to come, and to make them our own. AMEN.