

St. Aidan of Lindisfarne: A Model of Humility to Be Imitated

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INTRODUCTION: As many of you know, Teresa and I led a pilgrimage last September to several Celtic Christian sites in Britain and Scotland. The first stop on our pilgrimage was the Holy Island of Lindisfarne just off the northeast coast of England. Holy Island is a tidal island and that means that twice each day, when the tide comes in, it is completely surrounded by water. The modern automobile causeway is completely covered with water. The only way to get to the island is by boat, or swimming, I guess.

One morning while we were on Lindisfarne, when the tide was out, Teresa and I, along with several other pilgrims, took off our shoes and socks, and walked across the wet sands from the mainland to the island—across the same sands that the Irish Celtic Christian monk, St. Aidan, crossed when he came from Iona in western Scotland to Holy Island in 635 AD, more than 1300 years ago! As we walked to Holy Island, our feet trod an ancient path marked by poles stuck in the ground, a path that faithful pilgrims have walked ever since Aidan settled on the island to found his Celtic Christian monastic community. From that community, Aidan and his fellow monks evangelized the English people.

I want to tell you about St. Aidan this morning. I want to lift him up as an extraordinary example of humility and Christian generosity, a person we can learn from and someone we should imitate. (By the way, when I became a Benedictine Oblate at Tanglewood Hill Monastery here in Freeland, I chose as my Benedictine name the name “Aidan”, because I want to try to imitate his example of humility and generosity, not always successfully, I confess.)

THE TEACHING: In the passage from the Venerable Bede, which Teresa read to you this morning, you heard a summary of the contribution Aidan made to Celtic Christianity. In fact, most of what we know about Aidan comes from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which was written soon after Aidan died in 651 A.D. Bede might well have ignored Aidan, for Bede was an Englishman, not an Irish man, and Bede had embraced the Roman Christian way, rather than the Celtic Christian way of Aidan and his community. But, Bede writes about Aidan with warmth and respect, because he

recognized Aidan's sterling character and his exemplary behavior. Bede had the highest praise for Aidan, praise I wish could be said of me, "He lived as he taught."

Now, if we take some time to look at Aidan's remarkable achievements, his humility will stand out even more clearly. So, I need to rehearse a little bit of history. Stay with me!

Even before Aidan went to Lindisfarne, we have a clear hint of his humility and generosity. In the reading this morning, Bede tells us that Aidan was not the first person to be sent from Iona to evangelize the English people. Oswald, who was king in northern England, had spent time in exile in the monastic community on Iona in western Scotland and there he embraced the Celtic Christian faith. When Oswald regained his English throne, he sent back to Iona and ask the community there to send a missionary to evangelize his people. The first missionary was a failure and blamed his failure on the stubbornness and barbarousness of the Anglo-Saxons! When he reported his failure to the Iona community, Aidan spoke up, Bede tells us, and said, "I think, brother, that you were more severe to your unlearned hearers than you ought to have been. [You] did not at first, give them the milk of more easy doctrine, until they should be capable of receiving that which is more perfect and of performing the higher precepts of God." When they heard this, his fellow monks realized that the Holy Spirit was pointing to Aidan as the one more fit to make another attempt at converting the Anglo-Saxons. So, the Iona community ordained Aidan as a missionary bishop and sent him out. Thus, in 635 AD, Aidan walked across Scotland, from Iona in the west to Lindisfarne in northeast England, and, when the tide was out, he walked across the sands from the mainland to Holy Island, just as we did on our pilgrimage. There Aidan established a unique monastic community. It was not simply a contemplative community, because it was founded specifically to be a center of missionary evangelism. Aidan was Irish and therefore a foreigner among the Anglo-Saxons. So, he wisely chose 12 young Anglo-Saxon boys, some of whom were slaves whose freedom he bought, in order to train them up to become Christian leaders among their own people. And, in order to do this, he founded the first school in England and the only training school for missionary leaders in existence at that time.

But there is more. Aidan also wanted women to become nuns, if they wished, and young girls to be educated; therefore he chose Hild (or Hilda, as she is also known), an Anglo-Saxon noblewoman, to found communities for women, who devoted themselves to the Celtic Christian way and also educated Anglo-Saxon girls. Aidan also established several other monastic communities in northern England, as well as several churches. He did all this before he died in 651, i.e., in 16 short years after his arrival on Holy Island! And we remember Aidan to this day: he is listed in our Episcopal calendar of saints and we make pilgrimages to his Holy Island of Lindisfarne. What a profound and lasting holy legacy!

Now, I could talk at length about any one of these amazing achievements of Aidan, all of which underscore his greatness; but I want to focus on his humility. If ever there was a time when we need to hear about humility, it is now. You know as well as I do that today's culture teaches us to assert ourselves, to "look out for #1". In our culture, any talk of humility is counter-cultural! But so, also, was Aidan's humble behavior, as I hope to show.

There are three stories in the tradition about Aidan that illustrate clearly his humble way of acting. First, he pioneered a new and humble method of evangelism. From the very start, Aidan rejected the usual missionary method of mass conversion and mass baptism, which was used by St. Augustine of Canterbury, our patron saint, for example. Here is how the usual missionary method worked. As a missionary bishop and a member of the elite yourself, you go into a new area and meet the king, who is a fellow elite; you convert the king to Christianity; and then you baptize all his subjects as Christians. In contrast to this approach through the elite, Aidan took the unusual way of walking the lanes of northern England and speaking to the common people he met—"walk-and-talk evangelism" some have dubbed it. This was something new and startling and definitely counter-cultural: a bishop and an aristocrat not riding a horse, actually choosing to walk like a peasant or a slave, i.e., like those who could not afford a horse. And he walked unarmed in a land where every adult carried a knife, because of the ever present danger of thieves on the roads. Aidan assumed the humble posture of a slave in order to win others to the Gospel of the One who came not to be served, but to serve.

By walking unarmed among the Anglo-Saxon people, Aidan embodied and introduced the God of peace to those who knew only the gods of war. His method of evangelism was slow, patient, marked by peace, and grounded in humility.

The second story is related to Aidan's humble "walk and talk" method of evangelism. It seems that the king was disturbed to find Aidan walking rather than riding a horse as a bishop and a fellow member of the elite should. So the king chose one of the best horses in his royal stable and gave it to Aidan. Not long after receiving the king's gift, Aidan met a poor beggar and gave away the king's horse to that beggar! When the king heard about this, he was furious! He called Aidan on the carpet and said: "Why did you give away my royal horse, when there are ordinary horses in the stable, which are more suitable for a beggar?" In a brilliant and profoundly theological answer, Aidan replied to the king with a question of his own: "Is a son of a mare more precious to the king than a son of God?" You see, taking the way of humility among the people gave Aidan the opportunity to be generous with the gifts he received, rather than use them to aggrandize himself. So, I lift Aidan up to you as a fine example of humility and generosity.

I have already told you that Aidan chose the Anglo-Saxon woman, Hild, to found communities for women and to educate young girls. This choice also reflects Aidan's humility. To encourage the education of girls and to help organize communities for women was extraordinary in Aidan's day. Remember that Aidan lived in a highly patriarchal society, where the fate of every girl was determined by her father and where only boys received an education. Aidan's involvement in the education of girls and the development of communities for women was clearly counter-cultural. As a member of the patriarchal elite, Aidan encouraged a woman, Hild of Whitby, to do what he himself was doing on Lindisfarne. No man, proud of his patriarchal privilege, would do what Aidan did to raise up women and young girls.

So there you have three examples from the life of Aidan which illustrate his exemplary humility: he chose a method of evangelism that involved walking among the people like a peasant or a slave, even though he was a bishop and a member of the elite; this humble method allowed him to give away to a beggar the royal horse he had been

given; and in a patriarchal society, where he was one of the chief patriarchs, Aidan chose Hild to organize communities where women could follow their call to an alternative life and where girls could be educated just as boys were educated.

In today's gospel we find another example of humility, indeed, the most profound example: Jesus, who is their Lord and Master, does the work of a slave, takes a towel and a basin of water, and washes and dries the feet of his disciples. Then Jesus tells his disciples that he has given them an example to imitate. Aidan absolutely got this! By choosing the path of humble service, Aidan imitated Jesus his Lord. Oh, yes, I know, we do not have a story of Aidan washing anyone's feet like Jesus did; but we do have these stories of Aidan choosing repeatedly a humble way of acting as he tries to imitate his Lord.

When I began this morning, I told you about our pilgrimage walk from the mainland to the Holy Island. When Teresa and I and the other pilgrims finished our walk through the wet sands of the pilgrim's path to Lindisfarne, Priscilla, one of our fellow pilgrims, was waiting to wash and dry our feet! As I think back, now, on that extraordinary and moving scene of Priscilla kneeling and washing our dirty feet on the steps of our bus, I am struck by her faithful imitation of Jesus! Like Jesus and Aidan, Priscilla chose the posture of humble service. And hers is a fine example of imitation.

SO WHAT? Perhaps I do not need to spell out for you what all this means for us today, in our lives here and now, in a culture that places little value on humility, sometimes even despises it, or considers humility as a sign of weakness. But humility is the biblical way, humility is the gospel way, humility is the Jesus way. The prophet Micah asks, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

But how do we become humble, someone might ask? As I look at the life of Aidan, as well as the lives of other Celtic Christian saints, like Pelagius and Patrick and Brigid, what I see is *imitation*: ordinary Christians *imitating* the lives of saints who have gone before them and, especially, *imitating* Jesus. That is the key to living a humble life, my friends: *imitation*. We can choose to imitate the humility of Jesus and Aidan and

Priscilla. Imitation will become habit and habit will soon become a way of life. Imitation is the key to becoming humble.

The good news is that we are not left alone in our attempts to imitate Jesus and the Celtic saints. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, which we celebrate today, Jesus is able to share his new life with us. This altar, with its bread and wine made holy, is where we receive grace to renew our lives to become imitators of Aidan in his Christian humility.

Amen