

Lent Compline 2024: St Cuthbert

I was cheered to see on the news that the National Trust is to re-open the Inner Farne to the public later this year. The island has been closed because of the ravages of Avian flu. Many people are drawn to visit the Inner Farne because of the wild-life; it is a renowned sea-bird colony and beloved of seals. But for some, they are drawn because it is a place of pilgrimage, following in the steps of St Cuthbert who made the Inner Farne his secluded retreat.

Cuthbert was born in around 635 probably in what is now the Scottish lowlands but was then part of the ancient Kingdom of Northumbria. He probably came from a Christian and privileged background. At the age of 17, while tending sheep on the Lammermuir hills, he saw a vision of angels bearing a human soul to heaven. He later found out that this was the soul of Bishop Aidan. The experience made him enter the monastery at Old Melrose under his mentor St Boisil. He then moved on to the monastery at Ripon, became Prior of Melrose, and later Prior of Lindisfarne,

After ten or so years at Lindisfarne, around the age of 40, he increasingly sensed the call to the eremitical life of solitude, first on a small island just off Lindisfarne, called Hobthrush and now known as St Cuthbert's Island. However, this island was easily accessible at low tide, and it was close to the monastery and so to countless distractions. And so, in about 676, the community granted him permission to retreat to the small rocky island known as Inner Farne, well out to sea. It was a harsh, unforgiving, cold environment. Cuthbert built a simple hermitage, an oratory, and a lodge for guests and cultivated what little soil there was. But even there, many crossed difficult waters to see him. At first, he would meet his visitors but later withdrew to his cell and in the anchorite tradition would speak to them through a window.

I want to suggest that for St Cuthbert, the Inner Farne was a sacrament, an outward and physical sign, of something deeply inward and spiritual. I often re-visit chapter 1 of St Mark's Gospel. For Mark gives an account of a typical day in the public ministry of Jesus. It was a Sabbath Day; Jesus went to the synagogue and taught and of course, good teaching makes demands on the teacher. He then performed an exorcism which included opposition, struggle, tension, conflict with evil. Lunch was delayed while he healed Peter's mother-in-law. In the evening, the whole town turned up, a crowd so large many couldn't get into the house. He healed very many people, and healing drained him. Who knows when finally he could get some rest? But then, Mark says, in the morning, while it was yet dark, he arose and climbed the hills around Lake Galilee and prayed. And so the next day, and so the next day. The picture is of intense, demanding, incessant, wearying activity and then deliberate withdrawal to a lonely place. For Jesus, those hills were his Inner Farne. For Jesus, those hills were a sacrament, an outward and physical sign of inward and spiritual grace.

One of the reasons why we still remember and revere Cuthbert is because we see in him such a degree of authentic Christ-relatedness, for that is what truly makes sinners saints. Indeed, Cuthbert seems to have modelled his own ministry on that of Jesus. The monks of Lindisfarne were not on some kind of permanent retreat on their little island off the Northumbrian coast. They came from Iona to be evangelists in an utterly demanding and unpromising area; the monastery on Lindisfarne was a place of perpetual leaving and

returning; their ministry was to travel, preach, teach, witness, convince, argue, baptise, encourage, warn. They had a treasure that they desired above all else to share. The task was huge and demanding – like Jesus they engaged in intense, demanding, incessant activity and then deliberate withdrawal. And we have good reason to think that Cuthbert was foremost in his commitment to this ministry.

But perhaps, like Jesus, he saw something deeper. You know, when Jesus withdrew to his Inner Farne, to a lonely place, while I'm sure he experienced 'the silence of eternity' and certainly he went to seek intimacy with his Father, I suspect he also engaged in struggle. This spirituality was to watch and pray – for sleep was behind him. This lonely place was a place of engagement - engagement in spiritual conflict, in the daily submission to the cost of what his baptismal call demanded, the daily need to say 'yes' to the Father, to subdue his will to the Father's will, and to engage in that sharp encounter with the Satan that kept on planting both doubt and assurance in his mind – 'If you are the Son of God' – it's a double-edged question; perhaps I'm not? But what if I am? – I could do anything.

So, Cuthbert needed the secluded place, the Inner Farne, his sacramental place, his place of aloneness, of solitude, a secret place, a place of intimacy. And indeed, a wild, barren place, a kind of wilderness at sea; a place of fierce wind, biting cold and severe weather, a place where both the beauty and severity of nature could minister grace. And where, like those Desert monks of Egypt before him, he could engage in that spiritual conflict that ultimately enables the victory of God.

And finally, when called from this way of life to two utterly demanding and exhausting years as Bishop of Lindisfarne, perhaps as he sensed his strength was failing Cuthbert went back to what Bede calls, his 'beloved life of solitary conflict', a conflict that would only be resolved in his death. He spent Christmas 686 in the monastery before returning to Inner Farne. He died on 20 March 687, within two years of his consecration. A later Abbot of Lindisfarne, Herefrith, gave this moving account:

He became ill on a Wednesday, and it was on a Wednesday also that the illness conquered him and he went to his Lord. He spent the day quietly until evening, awaiting the joys of the world to come, and continued peacefully with his prayers throughout the night. At the usual time for Compline I gave him the sacraments that lead to eternal life. And so, strengthened with Body and Blood of the Lord in preparation for the death he knew was now imminent, he raised his eyes heavenwards, stretched upwards his arms, and with his mind full of the praise of the Lord, he sent forth his spirit to the bliss of Paradise.

Bede, *Life of Cuthbert* 39 & 40

Do you have an Inner Farne? You may have a particular physical place or you may not, for the hills, the island, were but a sacrament, an outward and physical sign of something else – I mean an 'inner Farne', a secret place within, a place where we go far away from the business of daily living, a place where we encounter God in intimacy, but where we struggle in the presence of God; for this is the place where the victories of faith must still be won, where the 'yes' to God becomes real.

Do you have an Inner Farne? Jesus did. Cuthbert did.