

St Andrew's Church Corbridge: Opening Weekend of the 1350th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Church by St Wilfrid

God's Rottweiler: St Wilfrid, Bishop and Bruiser! A talk given by the Vicar, Canon Dr David Kennedy, St Wilfrid's Day, Saturday 12 October 2024

When I was inducted here, exactly six years ago on 11th October 2018, the Eve of St Wilfrid's Day, Bishop Mark Tanner, then Bishop of Berwick, began his sermon with something like these words:

'If I had known St Wilfrid personally, I think I would have admired him greatly, but I'm not sure that I would have liked him.'

As many of you know, I came here after 17 years at Durham Cathedral, the Shrine of St Cuthbert, our Cuddy. Cuthbert is our best-loved Saint of ancient Northumbria; we also love the gentleness of bishop Aidan, but Wilfrid, well, he is rather different. Hence, my rather daring title for this talk.

So, what are we to make of our founder? I hope to explore some aspects of his personality and character, to try to get inside the man. I hope to explore what motivated him, and what we might learn, both positively and negatively, for the life of the Church today as we begin this anniversary year which will celebrate the past but also inspire the future.

So let me give you an overview of Wilfrid's life, before I attempt an assessment of his legacy.

Wilfrid came from a wealthy and privileged background. His parents were part of the nobility of the ancient Kingdom of Northumbria. He didn't have to claw himself up from the bottom. He would be taught from an early age to be at home with the rich and powerful. I could image him as a confident and possibly precocious child, articulate, outgoing, eloquent. Bede tells us that as a child he was 'deservedly loved, honoured and cherished by his elders as though he were one of themselves'.¹ So, he was wise beyond his years. It is clear that this was underscored by a prodigious intellect. He was also brought up to be deeply religious. The Christian faith was still quite young in the Kingdom of Northumbria. Wilfrid was born in 633 or 634, only a year or so before St Aidan founded his monastery at Lindisfarne. But Christianity captured Wilfrid's young imagination.

¹ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* V.19

So, at 14, we find him at the Court of King Oswy and Queen Enfleda, but rather than become a courtier instead, he was sent to Aidan's monastery at Lindisfarne. Again, Bede tells us that he was keen to embrace the monastic vision of life fully – he sought monastic 'purity and devotion'.² Moreover, his intellect enabled him to memorise the whole Psalter as well as other writings. Now King Oswald had invited St Aidan from the Isle of Iona to evangelise Northumbria. Aidan was immersed in the traditions of the ancient Church of Ireland, what we often call the Celtic Church. So, Wilfrid was schooled in the Irish monastic tradition. But Queen Enfleda had come from Kent where her brother was King to marry Oswy. So, the Queen ensured that Wilfrid was told how Pope Gregory the Great had sent Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, to evangelise the south-east in 597, and how the traditions that came from Roman differed from those of Iona. Wilfrid was determined to visit Rome. And so, the Queen sent him to her family in Kent, where he was introduced to that great traveller St Benedict Biscop who would later found the dual monasteries at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, where Bede served as a monk. So, in 653, when Wilfrid was only 19, they crossed the channel. They got as far as Lyons, in ancient Gaul, and Wilfrid was so captivated by what he found there that he elected to stay in Lyons while Benedict Biscop continued towards Rome. The local Archbishop who was so impressed by him that he wanted him to stay and even offered him his niece in marriage – Wilfrid was still a layman at this time.

But the lure of Rome was strong, and so eventually Wilfrid continued his journey. At Rome he thoroughly immersed himself in all things Roman, and was even granted an audience with the Pope. He then returned to Lyons where he became a monk, but these were dangerous days - the local Archbishop was murdered, and Bede tells us Wilfrid desired the path of martyrdom himself, but was persuaded to return to Northumbria for safety. Just as Wilfrid had been patronised by Queen Enfleda, so now he was adopted by the son of King Oswy, Alhfrith, who gave him lands in Yorkshire. Thus, Wilfrid began his association with Ripon, becoming Prior of the monastery there. He was a vigorous leader, developing the monastery, training many in the religious life, and seeking to spread the faith. He was also ordained as priest.

Now Wilfrid had become absolutely convinced that the Roman traditions were above all others, and he therefore rejected those customs of the Irish Church that differed from Rome. This included the calendar, and especially how the date of Easter was calculated. This was becoming an increasingly controversial issue in the Church.

² Ibid.

So, in 664 King Oswy called a Synod at St Hild's monastery at Whitby to settle the issue. The Irish contingent, led by Colman, one of Aidan's successors as Bishop of Lindisfarne, regarded the Irish/Celtic tradition as following the teaching of the Apostle John. The Roman contingent was led by a Bishop called Agilbert. The Synod was astonished when Agilbert invited Wilfrid, then only 30 years old, to present the case for conformity to Rome in his stead. And Wilfrid used all his intellect and force of personality to argue for the primacy of St Peter over St John. So, instead of honouring diversity and the integrity of ancient traditions, Wilfrid demanded conformity, and the King found in favour of the Roman usage and against the Irish. Bishop Colman and others retreated back to Iona in despair, but others like Hild and Cuthbert, who were trained in the Irish tradition, accepted the decision, however reluctantly, and so Northumbria became aligned to Rome and Canterbury. The reward for Wilfrid was his appointment as Bishop of York. But here we see another side of Wilfrid. He was so uncompromising that he refused to be consecrated by the Bishops of Northumbria as he thought they might be tainted and his consecration be deemed unsound, which was, I think, grossly unfair to those godly bishops. So, he returned to France for consecration. But he stayed abroad too long, and the Archbishop of Canterbury gave up on him, and so appointed St Chad as Bishop of York in his place. Wilfrid was furious, and made his feelings plain – he had been unlawfully usurped.

Wilfrid returned to Ripon, but devoted his energies to the southern kingdoms of Mercia and Kent, becoming Bishop of Lichfield. He was vigorous in founding monasteries and churches and seeking to bring people to faith. But then, a new Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore, examined Wilfrid's protestations and determined that he had indeed been wrongly deprived of the See of York, so reinstated him and sent the humble Chad to Lichfield.

And it was this return to York that was so significant for us here in Corbridge. He restored what is now York Minister, and built his great Church at Ripon – what is now Ripon Cathedral. In 672 Queen Ethelfrith or Etheldreda as she is better known, granted him lands at Hexham where he founded a monastery, which we know as Hexham Abbey. And, about the same time, he founded the monastery at Corbridge, because of its strategic significance for the crossing of the Tyne. Both Hexham and Corbridge were dedicated to St Andrew, St Peter's brother. Wilfrid revered Andrew as the first missionary apostle because St John's Gospel tells us that he brought his brother Peter to Jesus at the beginning; he also brought the little boy with 5 loaves and two fishes to Jesus for transformation, and most importantly he brought the Greeks who came to see Jesus on the eve of his passion as a sign that Jesus is the Saviour of the world

And the foundation of Corbridge is significant. In older days, like the monastery of Aidan, the monks would have gone out from the monastery to the villages and then returned. But Wilfrid was planting new Churches with resident monks and priests. Part of his legacy was that he established the Rule of St Benedict in his monasteries. The rule has three main emphases – the *Opus Dei*, the work of God by which Benedict meant the eight daily monastic services; *stabilitas loci*, stability of place, which means being rooted in a community, and *labor* or work, which enables the community to live. So here in Corbridge he established a Church both for his monks but also for the people of this community. The monasteries also were centres for the education of children, care for the sick and support for the poor. For Wilfrid, this was making the Christian faith visible, setting it at the heart of the communities that were forming around it. And when he built new churches, he determined that these Churches would not be made not of wood but of stone. This was, I think, for two reasons. First, he was impressed by the grandeur and beauty of the stone Churches he saw in Gaul and especially in Rome – in some ways, he was bringing Rome back to Northumbria. Second, stone Churches witnessed to permanence. Wooden churches were fragile, vulnerable to severe weather and fire, but stone Churches guaranteed longevity. As we know, Hadrian's Wall provided a ready source of stone, as did the ruins of Corstopitum just down the river, where Wilfrid delighted in the rich carvings on the dressed stone. It is likely that, while Wilfrid's masons built the stone churches at Hexham and Corbridge, temporary wooden structures served as both Church and living quarters, but very quickly, the stone buildings rose and so at Ripon and Hexham we still have Wilfrid's crypts and at Corbridge we have our Roman Arch and Saxon lower tower and part of the Saxon nave walls. And to that we can add the other ancient Andrew Churches along the Tyne at Bywell and Heddon, built in the same tradition, if not by Wilfrid himself, then by others who valued his legacy. And here we are 1350 years later. Corbridge is still dominated by its Parish Church in the heart of this Village.

Let me briefly summarise the rest of his life. As I have said, Wilfrid courted both royalty and Archbishops. But in 678, just four or so years after founding Hexham and Corbridge, he fell out with both King Ecgfrith and Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury. I think the latter felt he was becoming too big for his boots, for he expanded the geographical reach of the See of York, and so the Archbishop wanted to divide his diocese up and so limit his power. The King was probably a bit jealous of his increasing wealth and influence. Wilfrid was furious, so he set off to Rome again to appeal to the Pope. The Pope supported him, but on his return, King Ecgfrith sent him to prison in Dunbar. On release, he could not return to Northumbria but travelled

to modern-day Sussex, at that time unevangelized. Again, he courted the local King and Queen so was appointed Bishop of Selsey near Chichester. As I discovered last year on my holiday in Sussex, he is greatly revered there and is Patron of the County. But he supported the vicious campaign of Cadwalla in making conquest of the Isle of Wight. So, by force and violence, they became Christians, but Bede takes a very dim view of Wilfrid's methods; the good end did not justify the means.

In the years before his death, he was reconciled to Archbishop Theodore, and Ecgfrith's successor King Aldfrith restored him to his monasteries at Ripon, Hexham and Corbridge, but he and the King also fell out, as the King had great affection for Iona where he had once lived and so resisted Wilfrid's autocratic agenda. Once more, Wilfrid was exiled and returned to Mercia. Eventually, a Church Synod even excommunicated him, and so yet again, he travelled to Rome to appeal to the Pope. Eventually, it was agreed that he could return to Ripon and Hexham, but *en route* he died at Oundle at the age of 76 in the year 710.

So, what an amazing life with remarkable achievements, but never far from controversy.

How might we assess his legacy?

First, I have no doubt of Wilfrid's passion for God, his love for Christ, and his desire to see Christianity spread and take deep root. There is also no doubt about his own commitment to study and prayer.

Second, Wilfrid was a man of *zeal*, and that zeal animated Wilfrid's whole being. My dictionary defines zeal as earnestness, and hearty and persistent endeavour. A zealot as someone who is uncompromising, fervent, single-minded, utterly determined, unwavering; in short, a whole-hogger. It's interesting that in his fascinating biography of St Paul, Bishop Tom Wright, former Bishop of Durham, uses the word *zeal* to encapsulate what motivated Paul and his energy, his drivenness, his single-mindedness, even to the point of being ready to suffer greatly for the sake of the Gospel.³ I see some parallels between Paul and Wilfrid; I revere Paul, but I'm not sure I would have liked to have worked with him. But look what he accomplished, and Wilfrid certainly accomplished so much in his life and ministry. So, he was a man of unflagging zeal. But zeal can become a snare as well as a blessing. And there is an aspect of Wilfrid's personality that is not so positive. He was clearly uncompromising and unbending. His high social status, his intellect, his self-confidence, his ambition,

³ Tom Wright, *Paul A Biography* (2018), 23, 31-39

meant that his life as a Bishop, as we have heard, was mired in controversy. He also seems to have let his zeal cloud his moral compass, especially in his support of Cadwalla's brutal conquest of the Isle of Wight.

Third, Wilfrid seems to have demanded uniformity; he doesn't seem to have coped well with difference. Now in the seventh century there was but one church of Jesus Christ. It wasn't until the great schism of 1084 that the Eastern and Western Churches broke communion, but before that, there were disputes about whether particular regional Churches were entirely orthodox. So, in the West, there was the great Church of Rome, and other western variants in Milan, Gaul, Spain and Ireland. And as I have said, the Irish tradition had a venerable pedigree, looking back to St John. Now, it is certainly true that the Synod of Whitby brought unity to the Church in what is now England, and opened up to ancient Northumbria those great traditions of what we might call European influence and culture. But for Wilfrid, there could be no compromise, no middle position, no accommodation. He wanted conquest, total victory. Bede writes that in his opening address to the Synod, Wilfrid argues that the whole western Church, followed Rome, and said:

The only exceptions are these men, and their accomplices in obstinacy, I mean the Picts and the Britons, who in these, the two remotest islands of the Ocean, and only in some parts of them, foolishly attempt to fight against the whole world.⁴

Well, if that is accurate, Wilfrid begins by calling his opponents obstinate (which sounds like the pot calling the kettle black) and foolish, and claimed they were fighting against the rest of the Church, which of course, they were not. Later he is somewhat rude about their founder, the great St Columba. Bede records Wilfrid as saying,

And even if that Columba of yours (yes, and ours too if he belonged to Christ) – was a man of mighty works, is he to be preferred to the most blessed chief of the apostles, to whom the Lord said, 'You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church.'⁵

This would have enraged Bishop Colman and his colleagues, who looked, yes, to Columba but also to the Apostle John.

⁴ *Ecclesiastical History*, III.25

⁵ *Ibid.*

Bede certainly gives Wilfrid a mixed assessment. Bede was absolutely in favour of the outcome of the Synod of Whitby. But he revered the Irish Bishops and monks of Lindisfarne. He deeply respected their simplicity and austerity, their devotion and piety, and their commitment to evangelism and learning. Bede recognised Wilfrid's achievements, but I think he struggled with Wilfrid's aggressiveness, and how he courted earthly power and wealth. Michelle Brown, the great historian of ancient Northumbria, in her recent Book on Bede says that when for a while Wilfrid was placed in charge of Aidan's monastery at Lindisfarne after St Cuthbert's death, he could barely speak of Wilfrid's time there, as it was so fractious.⁶ Clearly, Wilfrid wanted totally to dismantle the old Irish ways and reform it by fiat and edict. It was not a happy outcome.

Fourth, there is something enigmatic about Wilfrid. On the one hand, he was from the nobility. He was brought up with fine clothes and fine food; he was surrounded by all the trappings of wealth. He wanted the Church to be wealthy, and to be endowed. He courted Kings and Princes, believing that the Church should be at the heart of earthly politics and power. And as a priest and Bishop he seemed to like fine robes, pomp and circumstance, and the rich adornment of churches and monasteries with books, relics, plate and fine buildings. Yes, he valued aesthetics, but we might say that there was a worldly aspect to him. Yet, other sources say how for long periods he set aside these things, living austerely, eschewing the places of power and devoting himself to prayer and study, teaching and evangelism. Perhaps these emphases were never really reconciled in him. We all have enigmatic parts to our character.

Fifth, he was not someone with whom I would like to pick an argument. His immovable forcefulness, intelligence, eloquence, and self-confidence, would simply have ground me down to the point of submission. His strengths were also his weaknesses. There was indeed something of the Rottweiler and bruiser about him; for once he got his teeth into you, there was no letting go, whether you were King or Archbishop!

But lastly, there is no doubt that Wilfrid was a passionate evangelist. Even when he faced opposition and reversals, he met that by channelling his energies into preaching Christ wherever he found himself. Evangelists have to be single-minded, they need to argue and convince, persuade, warn, and bring people to the point of decision. Wilfrid had those gifts. And in many instances, he used his character and personality for good. Again, it illustrates the positive aspect of his zeal.

⁶ Michelle P. Brown, *Bede and the Theory of Everything* (2023), 125, 238.

And so, here we are today. 1350 years on. Ripon Cathedral, Hexham Abbey and now St Andrew's here in Corbridge, celebrate the continuing of what he founded all those centuries ago. It reminds us that we too must proclaim the faith that these stones point to. I hope and pray that this year we will be able to carry forward the work of the gospel here in Corbridge, so that we can inspire the future and hand on the faith to those who will follow us, but perhaps with a careful blend of Wilfrid's zeal, Cuthbert's simplicity, and Aidan's gentleness.