

Northern Saints: St. Oswald and St. Aidan Linda E Hunter

The theme of Northern Saints has been chosen to whet our appetites as we begin to think about our 1350 anniversary year which commences this October. This book 'The History of the English Church and People' written by Bede gives really valuable information about not only Bede himself, but in chronological order the lives of many of those we will be hearing about in the next few weeks.

Our copy of Bede's history is of course the modern English version translated from the Latin and is believed to have been completed in 731 when Bede was approximately 59 years old. It is considered one of the most important original references on Anglo-Saxon history, and has played a key role in the development of an English national identity.



I want to take you back in time, let's set off on our pilgrimage.

Imagine you are on the causeway walking across to Lindisfarne, the soft sand slipping through your toes as you walk and the cool, clear water lapping over your feet.

I wonder how many other people have walked on that causeway all those centuries ago, how many conversations have taken place since then, how many prayers have been offered to God, how many people have found faith. Tonight on our pilgrim journey, we are going to join Oswald and Aidan as we try to gain an insight into the important part they played in the development of our Christian heritage here in Northumbria.

So, as we pause to reflect on that sand causeway with the sun high in the sky we begin with Oswald. Who was he?

He was the son of the Northumbrian King, Ethelfrith. After a fierce battle in 616 when Edwin seized his father's kingdom. Oswald, was forced into exile in Scotland, where he was converted to Christianity, his faith was nurtured by the community on Iona to which he had fled.



Iona Abbey

I am sure, Oswald would have had many places on Iona that he would go, the many sandy coves and beaches, the hermit's cell in the middle of the island as well as attending the daily

offices in the Abbey. Places where he could reflect and ponder, the call God had on his life. Places to be close to God in that thin place where the veil between heaven and earth so easily merges into one. Perhaps you can picture him doing this? When Edwin died in 633, Oswald and his family returned to Northumbria. Oswald was determined to regain his kingdom, to face in battle the British king Cadwallon, who had killed his brother, Eanfrith, and taken the kingdom. Oswald assembled an army at Heavenfield near Hexham, some of you may well have been there.

The cross at Heavenfield - St. Oswald's church is hidden by trees in the distance



It is a most interesting church with many photographs and information on display. It was here that Oswald erected a wooden cross, gathered his army around it, and prayed for victory. The night before the battle, he had a vision of St Columba, who was of course Abbot of Iona Abbey, promising him victory against the larger British army.

St Bede records the following:

When King Oswald was about to engage in battle with the heathen, he set up the sign of the holy cross and, kneeling down, prayed God to send his heavenly aid to those who trusted in him in their dire need. It is said that, when the cross had been hurriedly made and the hole dug in which it was to stand, the devout king with ardent faith seized the cross and placed it in position himself, holding it upright with his own hands until the soldiers had heaped up sufficient earth so that it stood firm. This done, he raised his voice, and calling out to his army, said: 'Let us all kneel together and pray to the true, the ever-living and almighty God to protect us in his mercy from the arrogant savagery of our enemies, for he knows that we fight in a just cause for the preservation of our nation.' The whole army did as he ordered and, advancing against the enemy as dawn was breaking, they won the victory that their faith deserved.

The result of the Battle of Heavenfield was a decisive victory for Oswald, enabling him to reunite Bernicia and Deira as the Kingdom of Northumbria bringing about a period of great stability. The cross can still be seen at Heavenfield today.

Bede goes on to tell us that:

At this spot where the king prayed, innumerable miracles of healing are known to have occurred which serve as a reminder and memorial of the king's faith. This place is known as 'the heavenly field', which name, bestowed upon it a long time ago, was a sure omen of future events, indicating that there the heavenly sign would be set up, a heavenly victory won, and heavenly miracles take place. It lies on the northern side of the wall which the Romans built from sea to sea.

As soon as Oswald had secured the kingdom, he wanted his people to share his faith in Christ. I wonder whether as he walked across the sand to Lindisfarne, he reflected on how he might share his faith, pondering with others what they could do together to share God's word, just as many pilgrims do today as they seek God's guidance and inspiration as they journey to 'holy places'.

As we continue this pilgrimage, as our feet walk over the soft, damp sand what are you pondering? Are you thinking about Oswald and his desire to share the gospel? Are you reflecting what your part may be now, and here, in this village?

Oswald, needed some help to carry out his work as a missionary and evangelist so he asked the Abbott of Iona - Ségéne mac Fiachnaí to send some monks to help preach the Gospel. This first mission was not successful because its leader was a stern man who patronised his hearers and was dismissive of their beliefs. He returned to Iona saying that it was impossible to convert these rough heathen Northumbrians.

So, Oswald summoned another monk, Aidan, from Iona. Aidan crossed the sound of Iona in a coracle with his companions, traversing across Scottish soil, all the while praying. Then they approached the causeway to Lindisfarne.



The Holy Island of Lindisfarne

Perhaps we should pause now and visualise that sight? Maybe you can recall looking across to small tidal island of Lindisfarne?

Lindisfarne Priory



On arrival, Oswald granted Aidan and his companions from Iona, the island of Lindisfarne, this gift, enabled them to establish a monastery and a bishopric in the political heart of the Northumbrian kingdom. What an opportunity for them. But, what a task.

Bede reports that:

And while the bishop was not fluent in the English language, it was most delightful to see the king himself interpreting the word of God to his ealdorman and thanes, for he himself had obtained perfect command of the Scottish tongue during his long exile.

Here was a King who was a servant for the sake of the gospel. Together with Aidan's gentle and humble approach their mission was successful and people were baptised in huge numbers.

Bede continues:

King Oswald had been instructed in the Christian faith by Bishop Aidan, with the result that the king and the English people under his rule not only learned to hope for the kingdom of heaven, which had been unknown to his ancestors, but were also granted by almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, an earthly kingdom greater than anything they had possessed. For Oswald gradually brought under his sceptre all the peoples and provinces of Britain speaking the four languages, British, Pictish, Irish and English. Although he wielded supreme power over the whole land, Oswald was always wonderfully humble, kind, and generous to the poor and to strangers.

As we pause on our pilgrimage as the sea washes over our feet, are you still contemplating on that great shared desire of Oswald and Aidan to impart God's message of love, of their desire to enable others, whoever they were, to be strengthened in their faith, and to uphold Christian values?

Unfortunately, Oswald did not reign for long. Bede penned this account of the death of Oswald:

Oswald fell in a fierce battle fought at the place called Oswestry against the same heathen Mercians and their heathen king who had slain his predecessor Edwin. He died on the fifth of August in the year 642. Oswald's great devotion and faith in God was made evident by the miracles that took place after his death.

Oswald died before he was 40 – today that would be considered a tragedy. But he had achieved much in those, short years. His body was dismembered and his head was buried at Lindisfarne. Under the threat of invasion in 875, the monks removed Oswald's head and Cuthbert's body. They were eventually buried together at Durham. Soon after his death, Oswald was made a saint and his fame spread throughout Europe.

So, with King Oswald dead, we continue to walk across the causeway, the sun starting to drop in the sky, with our toes we can feel the warm, damp sand and the occasional wave swilling over our feet as the tide gently comes in.

So what about Aidan. He gave his clergy an inspiring example of self-discipline, teaching by example the way of life his followers should practice. Worldly goods were of little interest to him and he gave much away to the poor. Travelling on foot unless compelled by urgent necessity to ride. He was persistent but gentle as he urged others to take up the life of faith. Inspiring Christian people by word and deed to live a good life and to be generous to others. As the

monastery on Holy Island grew, missionary journeys and the foundation of new monasteries by Aidan's pupils reached far into distant Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Bede records that

Death came to Aidan when he had completed sixteen years as a bishop while he was staying at a royal residence near Bamburgh. Having a church and cell there, he often used to go and stay at the place, travelling around the surrounding countryside to preach. When he fell ill, a tent was erected for him on the west side of the church, so that the tent was actually attached to the church wall. And so it happened that, as he drew his last breath, he was leaning against a post that buttressed the wall on the outside. He passed away on the last day of August 651, in the seventeenth year of his episcopate, and his body was taken across Lindisfarne and buried in the monks' cemetery.

As for the last time on this pilgrimage we feel the warm, damp sand and the occasional wave swilling over our feet let us remember all we have heard about Oswald and Aidan that will help us as we cross that damp, sandy causeway of our life?

Let us be reminded that each and everyone of us is called to serve not only God but one another, to share our faith as Oswald had a burning desire to do and to be humble and gentle just as Aidan was.

Both Oswald and Aidan in different ways demonstrate to us that our Christian lives should be rooted in faith, lives of service, offering what little we can for others.

And so as the sun drops down in the sky and the darkness begins to enfold the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. We have reached the end of this pilgrimage - Lindisfarne is once more cut off, shake the sand off your feet and as you do so, if you remember anything of this journey tonight, remember that as God's people we need to follow in the footsteps of Oswald and Aidan to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.

Collect for St. Oswald

Lord God almighty,
 who so kindled the faith of King Oswald with your Spirit
 that he set up the sign of the cross in his kingdom
 and turned his people to the light of Christ:
 grant that we, being fired by the same Spirit,
 may always bear our cross before the world
 and be found faithful servants of the gospel;
 through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
 who is alive and reigns with you,
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 one God, now and for ever. Amen.



In St. Oswald's Church, Knuzden

Collect for St. Aidan

Everlasting God,
you sent the gentle bishop Aidan
to proclaim the gospel in this land:
grant us to live as he taught
in simplicity, humility and love for the poor;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.