

Lent Reflection 2024 - St Wilfrid

Wilfrid is an interesting saint, to say the least - he was a monk, an abbot, a bishop - a founder of many monasteries and churches (not least a little-known gem called St Andrew's in Corbridge). He is credited with introducing the monastic Rule of St Benedict to England; renowned for being very learned, having studied at Lindisfarne, Canterbury, Francia, and Rome. Of noble birth, he was a friend of kings and a persuasive speaker, he's remembered for arguing passionately for keeping to the Roman method of calculating the date of Easter, so successfully that the king's son appointed him a bishop in Northumbria.

Wilfrid is someone with huge saintly credentials - someone who the English church owes a great deal to, and someone who we, as we prepare to mark our 1350th anniversary, also need to remember with thanksgiving and joy.

There's only one problem - for all his achievements, it also seems that Wilfrid was, alas, profoundly unlikeable - and that's putting it mildly.

Wilfrid seems to embody both the best and worst of ordinary humanity, often at the same time - he's a figure who divided his contemporaries, and has continued to divide historians since his death in around 709AD. Take this description from Bede of Wilfrid's time as bishop in what is now West Sussex in the southeast:

'But Bishop Wilfrid, while preaching the Gospel to the people, not only delivered them from the misery of eternal damnation, but also from a terrible calamity of temporal death. For no rain had fallen in that district for three years before his arrival in the province, whereupon a grievous famine fell upon the people and pitilessly destroyed them... But on the very day on which the nation received the Baptism of the faith, there fell a soft but plentiful rain; the earth revived, the fields grew green again, and the season was pleasant and fruitful. Thus the old superstition was cast away, and idolatry renounced, the heart and flesh of all rejoiced in the living God, for they perceived that He Who is the true God had enriched them by His heavenly grace with both inward and outward blessings. For the bishop, when he came into the province, and found so great misery from famine there, taught them to get their food by fishing; for their sea and rivers abounded in fish, but the people had no skill to take any of them, except eels alone... By this benefit the bishop gained the affections of them all, and they began more readily at his preaching to hope for heavenly blessings, seeing that by his help they had received those which are temporal.' (Ecclesiastical History, pp.246-247)

So far, so saintly - noble bishop has compassion for the people he has been sent to - it is a story that preempts the adage, 'give someone a fish, and they will be fed for a day, teach someone to fish, and they will be fed for life,' - Wilfrid teaches those who suffer how to feed themselves, and on top of this his preaching is accompanied by a miraculous end to a three-year drought. But, you'll note, that Wilfrid was first made a bishop in Northumbria, so why the move?

Put simply, Wilfrid was expelled from Northumbria because the king took a strong disliking to him, and throughout his life, on multiple occasions, Wilfrid is expelled from a place, and at one

point is even excommunicated from the Church. In the end the charges his excommunication was based on were declared to have been malicious - but we still might wonder why people felt such malice towards him in the first place. Wilfrid seems to have been someone who made a strong impression wherever he went: intelligent and perceptive, but also strong-willed and perhaps over-bearing; ostentatiously generous, but also ostentatious in displays of his wealth.

Wilfrid the saint was dedicated *and* argumentative; prayerful *and* showy; winsome *and* abrasive - a collection of contradictions who feels all the more real for it. Wilfrid is then, undoubtedly a saint, but not as we often know them - frankly, I deeply admire Wilfrid, but I'm not sure I would have liked him if I'd met him.

A challenge, then - what exactly to make of this person, of this sort of saint?

In many ways, Wilfrid is the perfect northern saint for Lent - as we reflect partly on our own sins, our own frailties and our need for God, we take time to reflect on someone who was clearly flawed, but just as clearly full of God, too.

In Wilfrid, we see the example of someone who was *trying* (in every sense of the word), and so we see a saint much like ourselves - someone with the capability of being both kind and callous - and crucially without there always being rhyme or reason explaining why one was on display and not the other.

We see a man drawn to the ideal of monastic humility, something at the very heart of St Benedict's Rule; who at the same time really wasn't humble at all. Wilfrid's life, then, is a pattern that we recognise - it's not hagiography - the polished retelling of a saint's life where they seem to have achieved perfection. Throughout his life, Wilfrid achieves great things, and also makes the same mistakes over and over, the same struggles over and over - his growth in faith and Godliness is stumbling, sometimes hard to see. Perhaps it's seen more in glimpses, like teaching a community to fish - moments that stop us from being able to pigeonhole Wilfrid as simply someone who rose to power and prominence and was sainted for it.

There's an earnestness to Wilfrid, an honesty, which means we have to take the whole of him - the good and the bad - if we want to truly begin to understand him.

And so it is also with ourselves during Lent - as we reflect on our lives, as we try to follow Christ, we learn that we can't simply declare ourselves to be saints *or* devils - we can't only look at our greatest achievements, any more than we can stare solely at our failings - we have to be willing to see both, as they truly are, if we want to look at ourselves honestly.

Perhaps that's the most challenging aspect of all, when it comes to Wilfrid - if someone whose flaws are so obvious can still be remembered as a saint, truly what is to stop any one of us being saints? When we look at Wilfrid, we lose one of our favourite excuses: that sort of dedication and commitment to Jesus isn't for me, because I'm too irritable, I'm too arrogant, I'm too argumentative, I'm too X, I'm too Y. Remembering Wilfrid, all of that has to fall away - we have to accept the good in us that exists alongside our shortcomings - and in reality is often harder to accept the good in us than the bad.

And so, we have Wilfrid in our collection of northern saints, in part to prevent us from reducing our image of saints to something overly pious or naive. The saints we are remembering week by week this Lent, were real people, with all that entails - which means in all sorts of ways, they are far closer to each of us than we perhaps want to admit.

That's where I'd like to finish - on that sense of nearness - as we continue to reflect week by week, we remember the lives of those who helped to form our faith and this place in countless ways - not as distant relics, but real people, far more like us than different - these people, these lives, are so close to ours.

In St Andrew's, either side of the high altar, there are two wooden statues: one of St Andrew, holding his cross - a man Wilfrid so admired - and the other (on the left) of Wilfrid himself. This statue is a reminder of just how close he is. I encourage you at some point this Lent to go into church and look more closely at this statue of Wilfrid - to look closely at his features, and to remember his complicated, beautiful legacy - his complicated, beautiful sainthood. For, in the end, there is no other kind of sainthood, whatever stories history might leave us of our saints.

Beautiful, complicated sainthood, for beautiful, complicated humanity.

Such sainthood is Lenten in its honesty, yes - but also - in its glory.