Wednesday Reflection on St Hild: Reading: Colossians 3.12-17

Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord[f] has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ[g] rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ[h] dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.[i] 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

It may simply be the way I have been formed, but when I drive on the Northumberland Coastal route, as I did last two weeks ago on holiday, I seem to feel the presence of the saints. It is as if centuries of time collapse, and I hear the whisper of Aidan, Oswald, and Cuthbert. And when I drive south-east, on the A171 coastal road over the North Yorkshire Moors and glimpse for the first time the ruins of Whitby Abbey, I feel the presence of the saints and rejoice in blessed Hild. It may simply be coincidence, but very often driving both north and south, I seem experience far more bright days than dull days and I seem to perceive a change in the quality of the light, as if there is a kind of subtle divine revelation going on.

We are so indebted to Bede; without him, we would know almost nothing of Hild. Bede tells us that she was of noble birth; that she was baptised by St Paulinus, the first Bishop of York, at the same time as St Edwin, the first Christian King of Northumbria, was baptised in 627. At the age of thirty-three, she entered the religious life in a monastery near Paris. But St Aidan recalled her to Northumbria and, Bede tells us, she entered a monastery north of the River Wear. Hild then moved to Hartlepool where she was appointed Abbess and presided over a dual monastery for women and men. Finally, she established a new dual monastery in Whitby.

It was at Whitby that the famous Synod was held in 664. Perhaps King Oswy was impressed by Hild's wisdom and spiritual stature in choosing this site to try to resolve the dispute between those who followed the customs of Rome and those who followed the customs of the ancient Church of Ireland. The two dominant issues were a dispute over the date of Easter and the form of the monastic tonsure. St Wilfrid was the champion of conformity to Rome. Bishop Colman was committed to the ancient traditions of Ireland. Easter was a particular problem for the King, Bede tells us. He had been trained in the ways of Ireland; his Queen in the ways of Rome.

So often when the King was celebrating Easter with rejoicing and feasting, his wife was still in Lent, in penitence and fasting or *vice-versa*.

Of course, St Hild was of the Irish tradition, having been trained by St Aidan at Lindisfarne in the manner of Iona. I think Hild, while perhaps saddened by the decision of the Synod, nevertheless realised that there had to be an agreement, for the sake of peace

Hild was acting in the spirit of Colossians 3, today's first reading. St Paul uses the image of clothing. There is certainly a baptismal background to this passage, and it is possible that baptism, which requires the putting off of the old self and the putting on of the new self in Christ, was ritualised by a change of clothing; clothes symbolising the old life were laid aside, and new Easter clothes were put on since baptism is the sacrament of Easter. If there is change, as there had to be at the Synod of Whitby, if old ways had to be laid aside, then what counts is a spirit of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. They are like underclothes. And of top of them, like a splendid shining garment is love, which Paul says, binds everything together. The exercise of these virtues, not the rights or wrongs of any human decision, enable the peace of Christ to continue to rule; these gifts, above all other things, preserve the unity of the body. And the passage goes on to exhort us to thanksgiving and worship. Here, thanksgiving is not about an insensitive rejoicing because we have won; it is rather a response to the love and grace of God to all of us, without exception. And worship, centred on the word of Christ and expressed in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs is what draws us away from ourselves and focusses us on God and his truth and his life and his mission.

I sense, that St Hild understood that instinctively. I believe that St Hild herself manifested a spirit of generosity, and once the decision was made, she called the whole Church to its baptismal dignity and to a ministry of thanksgiving and to a priority of worship and praise. That is what leadership demanded of her. And this is the leadership that she gave.

May Hild continue to speak to us as we remember her life and example today. For if she were here with us today, she would, I think, fully recognise the same faith that she lived in her day. And she would, I believe, lead us in thanksgiving and in worship. So may the light still shine on the A171 and the Northumberland Coastal Route, for truly the saints of the North-East coast are not very far from us.