

Wednesday Reflection by David Kennedy

The ancient Kingdom of Northumbria stretched from the Humber to the Forth, taking in much of present-day Northern England and Lowland Scotland. In scores of Churches both north and south of the border you will find stained glass windows or carved altar pieces showing St Cuthbert holding the head of St Oswald. Why? Well, the answer is that Oswald's skull was placed in St Cuthbert's coffin and their mortal remains still lie buried in Durham Cathedral.

But historically, we have to think not such much as St Oswald and St Cuthbert as St Oswald and St Aidan. As a boy, following the capture of his father King Aethelfrith, Oswald was taken to the island of Iona and schooled in the traditions of the ancient Church of Ireland. When Oswald later returned to claim the Kingdom of Northumbria, and sought to re-establish the Christian faith there, it was natural that he should look to his friends and mentors on Iona. And so it was that after a false start, in 635 St Aidan came to Northumbria at Oswald's invitation, and it was Aidan who established his monastery on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, within sight of the royal court at Bamburgh. King and Bishop then began the great work of evangelisation. Alas, Oswald's reign was short-lived, for seven years later he was killed by the pagan king Penda at Oswestry at the age of 38 on 5 August 642.

The Venerable Bede speaks of Oswald's piety, and his generosity to the poor and to strangers. He was a warrior, as you had to be in those turbulent days, but Oswald had a vision, of a people converted to follow the way of Christ. I find it fascinating that the evangelistic mission, established by Aidan and his monks, found the going hard; people at first seemed unresponsive to the Gospel, until, as Bede tells us, Aidan counselled simplicity; the patient teaching of Christian basics, adorned by a Christ-like simplicity and holiness. That, it seems to me, is the right approach in our day, when so many people have little understanding of Christian faith. Simplicity of teaching and holiness must be the hallmarks of contemporary Christian mission.

And yet, we should not be surprised if it is all a bit of a struggle. Tomorrow is the Feast of the Transfiguration, that mountain-top, mystical revelation of the glory of Jesus in the presence of Peter, James and John, when he was utterly transformed, when his divine glory was revealed. One of the things that fascinates me about that story is the fact that after this sublime experience on the mountain top, Jesus descends into chaos; a distraught father, a child suffering uncontrollable convulsions, and arguing and impotent disciples. 'How long has it been like this?' Jesus asks, as he rebukes the faithlessness and perversity of the human condition. And then we get an insight into how costly healing is – 'Why couldn't we deal with it?', his disciples ask. Jesus is clear, 'This sort can come out only by prayer'. That is, whatever physical conflicts we face, there is an accompanying and deep-seated spiritual conflict. Just as the Cross itself was indeed something physical and yet in

reality it is something fundamentally spiritual, the overcoming of sin, evil and death. This prevailing prayer; this work of salvation, is a costly business.

In today's Gospel, Jesus warns us of this. Just at the point when the disciples think they have understood, Jesus shows how little they understand. 'At last', they say, 'you are speaking clearly' - we understand, it all makes sense, no more riddles. And yes, we believe that you are the answer, that you have indeed come from God'. But Jesus challenges them, 'Do you really believe?' And he gives that chilling prophecy that they are to be scattered; that they will abandon him and leave him utterly alone, forsaken.

But then comes a word of grace, 'I have said this to you that in me you have peace.'. 'In the world', he says, 'you will have trouble'. 'Take courage, I have overcome the world.'

That word, 'Take courage, I have overcome the world' is one that we must take hold of. For it must have seemed to St Aidan that Oswald's death was a devastating blow and he must have feared for the future of the Christian mission to Northumbria, for the future of the Church, fears that we might well share. But the mission continued and God was already preparing the call of Cuthbert, even as Aidan himself was dying.

The saints are not dead heroes but living witnesses to him who has overcome the world and who share his victory with his holy ones. The symbol of Cuthbert carrying the head of Oswald is to me a sign of a wonderful continuity, of a succession of faith from Oswald and Aidan and Cuthbert and down through the years to this very day. The Church has a big task and yes, Aidan was right, simplicity of teaching and holiness of life, as we engage in the same struggle that he did. But in the midst of it the gift of peace is what sustains us in the struggle, in the times when we cry out 'How long has it been like this', as the future breaks into the present, and suddenly we see a glimpse of transfiguration. It's all there in today's gospel:

I have said this to you so that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have trouble. But courage, I have conquered the world.