

April 22, 2019

Bede's Necklace

Being an account of The Conversion of the Northumbrians, The Synod of Whitby and Divers Other Matters

The feast day of St. Bede--otherwise known to us as the Venerable Bede—takes place on May 15, and it is on that day that his Christian life is celebrated in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Churches. As Bede's sainthood is established by tradition rather than through the formalized canonical process the Roman Church now uses, we don't know what proven miracles can be attributed to his divine assistance. However, given his deserved reputation as a linguist, I would like to think that his miraculous intervention may have helped at least one pious schoolboy in passing his final exam in Latin composition.

Whatever the day, it is always a good time to admire Bede's many accomplishments. He was named a Doctor of the Church by Pope Leo XIII in 1899, and he is the only English-born theologian so recognized. He also is the only Englishman to be listed among the blessed in Dante's *Paradiso* (*Book X*, l. 130). I leave it to you to decide which of these honors is the more distinctive.

Although Bede's position in the church calendar is mostly attributable to his extensive catalog of theological works, he also wrote books on other subjects,

including primers designed to instruct young students in Latin composition, books on poetic meter, rhetoric, orthography, natural history, the calculation of time, and, of course, what for us is his greatest composition, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.) This work is the major written source of what we know about the history of England up to the period ending in 731 AD, the date of its completion. Although encumbered with tales of miraculous events, the book is serious history, based on the few available texts by earlier writers, responses to enquiries Bede sent out to others who might have information on the subject at hand, and accounts by living witnesses of more recent events.

Bede's Ecclesiastical History contains all sorts of fascinating information. My favorite is a short passage that tells the story of Caedmon, England's earliest poet, and provides a Latin paraphrase of his poem, which in its Anglo-Saxon version is the oldest verse in the English language. According to Bede, Caedmon was an illiterate cowherd at Whitby who was ordered by a mysterious visitor in a dream to sing a song about what the stranger called "the beginning of things." Caedmon protested his inability to sing, but the stranger insisted and a star was born. Bede says Caedmon went on to compose many other beautiful verses, but

this single poem, which was later written down in its original Anglo-Saxon, is his only surviving work. Here it is in a modern translation:

Now we ought to praise the Guardian of the heavenly kingdom,
The might of the Creator and his conception,
The work of the glorious Father, as he of each of the wonders,
Eternal Lord, established the beginning.
He first created for the sons of men
Heaven as a roof, holy Creator;
Then the middle-earth, the Guardian of mankind,
The eternal Lord, afterwards made to be
The earth for men, the Lord almighty.

A good illustration of Bede's work as a historian is provided by his account of the Synod of Whitby, a long ago event which marked a turning point in English religious and political history with some continuing significance even today. To set the stage, we will briefly summarize Bede's history of the origins and growth of Christianity in the British Isles, focusing on events in the ancient Kingdom of Northumbria.

Christianity came to Britain with the Romans as one of several Eastern religions that the soldiers and merchants brought with them in the early period of the Roman occupation. Bede tells us that Christianity spread from the Roman occupiers to the native Britons when Lucius, king of the Britons, was converted in 156 AD during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Bede also provides a

stirring account of the first British martyr, St. Alban, who was executed in 304 during the Diocletian persecutions. By 313, when Christianity became the official religion of Rome, the church in Britain was well established, as evidenced by the appearance of three British bishops at the Council of Arles in 324.

Roman rule began to break down in 367, when the northern Picts overran Hadrian's Wall. Order was restored, but broke down again in 383, when Magnus Maximus revolted and led most of the troops in Britain to Gaul in his campaign to supplant Gratian as Western Roman Emperor. In 401, Flavius Stilicho, consul under Emperor Honorius, stripped Hadrian's Wall of troops to reinforce his defenses against Alaric's invasion of Italy, and in 407 Constantine III took what was left of the garrison to Gaul in yet another revolt. In 410, Honorius, once again beset by Alaric, informed the Britons that Rome could no longer defend them, and advised that they must henceforth protect themselves as best they could against their many enemies.

And there were lots of them: Pictish invaders from the North, Scots raiders from Ireland, and Saxon pirates who were coming over in increasing numbers from across the German Ocean. Over the course of the next 200 years, the Saxons and their Angle and Jute cousins began to settle in the South and East of

England, while the Scots occupied the Southwest of Scotland and pushed the Picts further north and east. The Romano-British resisted, sometimes with success, but eventually were forced back into Wales and a strip of territory along the west coast around Carlisle. This retreat left the pagan “English,” as they called themselves, in control of everything else south of the Tweed.

The English settlements in Northumbria began around 547 at Bamburgh in what became the Kingdom of Bernicia, and in another settlement called Deira east of the former Roman fort at York. In 603, King Aethelfrith of Bernicia secured his northern boundaries when he won a great victory over the Scots, pushing his borders up to Edinburgh, and shortly thereafter gained control of Deira in a palace coup. The consolidated territories of Bernicia and Deira became the Kingdom of Northumbria, which was to dominate the north of England for the next two hundred years. A ghost of this former powerhouse survives today in the English county of Northumberland, but the old kingdom was much larger, stretching south from Edinburgh past the Scottish border on the River Tweed, past the old Roman border at Hadrian’s Wall, past the settlements that became Newcastle, Durham and York, and on to Hull on the River Humber.

Although most of British England had become pagan as the result of the English invasions, Christianity survived in Wales and was brought to Ireland in the 5th Century through the missionary efforts of St. Patrick, a Briton by birth. The Scots were already at least nominal Christians when they migrated from Ireland to Scotland in the early part of the 6th Century. In 563, St. Columba came over from Ireland to establish a mission outpost at Iona and rapidly converted the northern Picts. He must have been very persuasive, because legend has it that when the king of the Picts refused to see him the gates of the castle burst open of their own accord. However achieved, the result was that all of Ireland and Scotland had become Christian by the end of the 6th Century.

Although strong in their faith, the Celtic Christians were cut off from the rest of Europe both by geography and by the pagan English. As a result, their institutions evolved in a different way from those of the Roman Catholics on the Continent. The theological differences were miniscule, at least to us: a different hairstyle for the monks' tonsures,¹ differences in the form of the baptism ritual, and a different method for calculating the date of Easter. But the social differences were quite important.

¹ I have been unable to determine what the Irish tonsure looked like. It apparently involved shaving a strip of hair from ear to ear, whereas the Latin tonsure created a bald spot at the top of the head. See <http://Wikipedia.org/wiki/Tonsure>.

The Celtic Church was monastic in form, with an aesthetic that emphasized holiness through withdrawal from the world. The Celts had bishops, as did the Romans, but all were monks subject to the disciplinary control of their abbots, if they weren't abbots themselves. They performed the sacerdotal functions of bishops, such as preaching, baptizing, confirming and ordaining priests and other bishops, but they did not have territorial dioceses. The monastic form of Celtic Christianity was well suited to a loosely organized tribal society that was held together, if at all, only by a common language. By contrast, the Roman Catholic Church on the Continent was increasingly centralized and hierarchic, with a Pope at its apex supported by an organizational apparatus that was international in scope. Such an organization was well suited to the aggregation of centralized power, a feature that made it attractive to the secular rulers who were struggling to keep control of their own restive populations.

These differences came to a head at the Synod of Whitby, as the result of the different ways in which the pagan English became Christians.

In 596, Pope Gregory I decided to send a missionary expedition to convert the English. His appointee, Augustine, landed in Kent in 597, where he was met by King Aethelberht. Bede tells us that Aethelberht insisted on a meeting in the

open air lest the strangers practice sorcery on him. As it turned out, Aethelberht was married to a British Christian princess, and he gave permission for Augustine to settle and preach at Canterbury. Things went well at first, with the personal conversion of Aethelberht and his Kentish followers, the establishment of a second bishopric at Rochester, and a successful mission to the East Saxons at London. However, the East Saxons soon relapsed into paganism, and the mission made little progress after Aethelberht died in 616.

These disappointments were offset by progress in the north, when Edwin, the new King of Northumbria, married one of Aethelberht's Christian daughters. As part of the deal, he promised to become Christian himself if, as he put it, "his council approved." Edwin procrastinated, but Paulinus, the missionary who had brought his bride up from Kent insisted and, when Pope Boniface intervened with no less than two letters reminding the king of his promise, he finally put the matter to his council.

The account of the council's deliberations is one of Bede's great literary set pieces, in which he uses speeches that could not have occurred in the verbatim form he relates, but nonetheless create a vivid picture of the way public business was conducted in the early Anglo-Saxon period.

As Bede describes the meeting, Edwin assembled all his nobles and religious leaders and asked each in turn for his opinion about the new religion. One noble adviser responded by comparing our lives to a sparrow in wintertime that flies into the king's banqueting hall from the dark, briefly enjoys the light, and then flies out again into the cold night. Anticipating Pascal's Wager by some 10 centuries, the adviser opined that the new learning might be worthy to be followed if it brings any better surety than our present ignorance about what comes before and after our brief lives. More dramatically, the high priest announced that his pagan faith has been proven worthless because he, its most ardent practitioner, has received few favors from the king, whereas a true god would have showered him with rewards. Based on this theologically dubious but thoroughly modern reasoning, he asked for arms and a stallion (things forbidden to priests), and rode to Godmundham, near York, where he symbolically cast a spear into his own pagan shrine and then personally dismantled it.

Whether Edwin was convinced by his advisers, by his apostate priest, or by Paulinus' preaching is unclear, but he was in any event baptized on Easter Day, 627. With the king in the bag, the rest of the country was quickly converted to Christianity. Unfortunately for the mission, Edwin was killed in 633 in a battle with Penda, the heathen king of Mercia, the next Saxon kingdom to the south.

This forced Paulinus and the royal family to flee back to Kent, putting a temporary end to the Christian presence in Northumbria. It also frustrated Pope Gregory's original plan of establishing a second archbishopric in the north, with Paulinus as its first incumbent. As a result, York did not receive its first archbishop until a hundred years later, in 735.

Edwin's death allowed Oswald, one of Aethelfrith's sons, to return from exile among the Scots and become King of Northumbria. Already a Christian as a result of his contact with the Scots, he turned to the Columban mission at Iona for help in restoring the Church in his new kingdom. In 635, St. Aidan and a group of monks arrived from Iona to found a monastery on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, which became the nucleus of a new mission to Northumbria, this time following Celtic rather than Roman Catholic practices. The mission prospered with the foundation of additional monasteries at Lastingham (651), Whitby (657), Ripon (658), and Melrose (660). Within the next generation, Christianity was firmly reestablished throughout the Kingdom of Northumbria, and its energetic missionaries had begun pushing south from Ripon into Mercia and northeast from Melrose into Scottish Lothian.

The southward advance brought the Celtic church in Northumbria into conflict with the Roman Catholic south, where Canterbury controlled. So long as the saintly Aiden lived, both forms of Christianity existed side by side, but a clash was inevitable. For one thing, the differences in the calculation of the date for Easter produced some strange anomalies. Bede tells us that Oswald's successor, Oswy, who followed the Celtic practice, sometimes found himself observing Easter while his queen, who had been educated as a Roman Catholic in Kent, was still observing Lent. For another, the Roman Catholic party regarded the Celts as dangerous schismatics, to the dismay of the Celts, who saw themselves as the preservers of Christianity in a barbarous age.

This mutual antipathy produced a war of words among the contending sides. The chief advocate for the Roman party was Wilfrid, then abbot of Ripon, a learned but somewhat irascible cleric who had adopted the Roman position after a visit to Gaul. Among those on the Celtic side were Colman, who had succeeded Aiden at Lindisfarne, Hilda, abbess of Whitby, and Cedd, a Northumbrian who had been sent to serve as bishop of the East Saxons. Seeking to resolve this vexing issue, King Oswy convened a grand synod of theologians and nobles to be held at Whitby in the fall of 663, with himself presiding.

The Easter controversy was as old as Christianity itself. The first Christians, being Jewish, celebrated the Resurrection on the same day as the beginning of Passover, which took place at sundown with the rising of the first full moon following the vernal equinox. However, Passover could begin on any day of the week, whereas later Christians decided that the celebration should always take place on the Sunday following the Passover moonrise, unless Passover began on a Sunday, in which case Easter would occur on the next Sunday. Unfortunately, due to disparities between the lunar and solar cycles, the first day of Passover could sometimes begin *before* the vernal equinox, which was thought to be unacceptable because Easter was a rite of renewal that should always come *after* the equinox. This required moving the date backwards to avoid a premature celebration. Coordinating a seven day calendar with a lunar occurrence taking place inside a solar year, so that the target Sunday fell in the right place on a rotating lunar-solar cycle proved to be quite a challenge.

Beginning around 202, astronomers began work on creating a uniform method for predicting the date of Easter for centuries into the future. The result was a series of tables based on an 84 year lunar-solar cycle that were developed in Rome at the end of the 3rd Century. These tables were probably carried back to Britain by the bishops who attended the Council of Arles in 324, and they

continued in use in Wales, Ireland and Scotland even after more accurate tables based on a 19 year cycle were developed in Alexandria around 390. The Roman Church adopted the Alexandrian tables around 525, and succeeded in persuading the southern Irish to adopt them in 633, but the older tables continued in use in northern parts of Ireland, Wales, Scotland and Northumbria.

Further confusion resulted from different Biblical statements concerning the date of the Resurrection, which the Gospel of St. John said had occurred on the 14th lunar day of the Passover month, but other scriptures identified as the 15th lunar day. The Celtic church followed St. John and used the 14th day, but the rest of the Church had opted for the 15th day. Thus, much of the debate centered around whether the followers of St. John should be accorded more respect than the followers of other ancient churchmen, including the followers of St. Peter.

If all this sounds like Swift's Lilliputian war over whether to open the wide or the narrow end of a soft-boiled egg, basic honesty requires us to acknowledge that some of our contemporary disputes will doubtless seem as obscure to our descendants as this one now seems to us. And if you think King Oswy, who spent

most of his time bashing the Mercians,² cared about the finer points of the controversy, you should think again.

As revealed in Bede's account of the debate, the king listened patiently while Colman and Wilfrid hurled historical precedents and scriptural quotations at one another. But he did not get interested until Wilfrid said that the Roman calculation method was supported by the successors of St. Peter, to whom Christ had given the keys of heaven. Bede tells us that Oswy then interrupted to ask Colman if it were true that St. Peter held the keys of heaven, to which Colman readily replied in the affirmative. Then Oswy asked, "Can you show any such power given to your Columba?" to which Colman could only reply, "None." That clinched it for Oswy, who concluded, in Bede's paraphrase,

"And I also say unto you, that he is the door-keeper, whom I will not contradict, but will as far as I know and am able, in all things obey his decrees, lest, when I come to the gates of the kingdom of heaven, there should be none to open them, he being my adversary who is proved to have the keys."

Debate over. Romans 1, Celts 0.

Thus defeated, Colman and his Scottish monks left for Iona, St. Hilda and other adherents of the Celtic rites changed positions, and Northumbria became Roman Catholic ever after-- or at least until the Protestant Reformation. The

² Oswy defeated and killed king Penda in 655.

struggle further north continued on for a while, but by 716 the northern Irish, the Picts and the monks at Iona had all come over, and, with the final capitulation of the Welsh in 768, the whole of the British Isles were finally reunited in obedience to the rituals and ecclesiastical controls that emanated from Rome.

It seems obvious to us moderns that the debate at Whitby was less about theology and more about political control, and that the larger and better organized Romans would eventually triumph over the Celts. However, Whitby has significance for us today because it was there that the decision for continued and closer integration with the rest of Europe was made. Although a romantic nostalgia for the good old days of the Celtic church's freedom from tight ecclesiastic controls remained, especially among Protestants following the break with Rome, the decision for more control at the center was final and the only question for future generations was whether the control would come from Rome or from London—or, perhaps I might add, for the roots of cultural history go deep, from Brussels.

Great things were accomplished in the years following Northumbria's conversion to Roman Catholicism. A new archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus, came over from Rome in 669 and set about reorganizing the upper clergy

along the Roman pattern. He was accompanied by Benedict Biscop, a Northumbrian nobleman who had become a monk and was returning home after a visit to Rome. Following a two year stint as abbot of St. Augustine's in Canterbury, Biscop took another trip to Rome and this time he returned to Northumbria with a rich collection of books. Ecgrith, the new King of Northumbria, was much impressed with Biscop's erudition, and in 674 he gave Biscop a large estate near Durham on which he founded the monastery that we now know as Monkwearmouth. In the same year, Wilfred, who had been made bishop of York, received land from Queen Etheldrada for a new monastery at Hexam. Using stones taken from Hadrian's Wall, he built a splendid basilica worthy of the new Roman authority. This essay in munificence was trumped in 681, when King Ecgrith gave Biscop another estate at nearby Jarrow, where Biscop founded an even more magnificent monastery to be administered along with Monkwearmouth under a single abbot.

These new monasteries were built in a style far grander than the wattle and daub structures of the earlier Anglo-Saxon period, with arched stone vaults, stained glass windows and magnificent libraries. To assure that the work at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow was up to Continental standards, Biscop brought over masons and glaziers from Gaul to build the buildings, jewelers from Italy to

encrust the libraries' book covers with precious stones, and a singing master from Rome to teach the monks to chant as the Romans did. The older monasteries were also embellished, and more were added, so that by the middle of the 8th Century a lustrous band of prospering monasteries stretched along the Northumbrian coast, enclosing the land like a glittering necklace. These monasteries became important centers of learning, with hundreds of monks turning out books of great beauty and value. Their works included the Lindisfarne Gospel of 698, now in the British Museum, and the Codex Amiatinus, which was made at Jarrow between 700 and 710 as a gift for the Pope and is today part of the rare manuscript collection of the Bibliotheca Laurentiana in Florence.

Bede tells us in his *Ecclesiastical History* that he was born on the estate at Monkwearmouth, and sent to the monastery to live at the age of seven. He transferred to Jarrow when it was being built, and probably helped in construction of the predecessor to what today is St. Paul's Church. It is even possible that his hands touched to old abbey church's dedication stone, dated April 23, 685, which is still on display there. Bede wrote his first book in 701, on Latin grammar and rhetoric, and eventually created a total of over 60 works, including numerous scriptural commentaries, a *Life of St. Cuthbert*, and, of course, the *Ecclesiastical History*. Except for single visits to Lindisfarne, York, and another

monastery whose name is not recognized today, it is likely that Bede spent his entire adult life at Jarrow until he died there on May 26, 735.

He was buried at the monastery, but after he had become an object of veneration his remains were moved in 1020 to Durham and placed alongside the reputedly incorruptible body of St. Cuthbert. In 1538, Henry VIII ordered the destruction of St. Cuthbert's shrine, and the saint's reportedly still uncorrupted body was reburied under a plain stone slab behind the high altar. Bede's probable remains (corrupted, it appears) were eventually re-interred in Durham's Galilee chapel, where his monument can still be admired today.

When Bede completed the *Ecclesiastical History* in 731, Northumbria was near the peak of its power and prosperity. His death three years later spared him from the knowledge that all this was would soon come to an end. In 793, the Danes attacked and destroyed Lindisfarne. Monkwearmouth-Jarrow was attacked in the next year, and Iona the year after that. As the attacks continued, the monks at Lindisfarne abandoned their monastery, taking St. Cuthbert's body with them, and eventually settled in a safer location at Durham. By 860, Monkwearmouth-Jarrow had been utterly destroyed by repeated raids. In 866, an invading Danish army chose to settle at York on a permanent basis, and in 875

they attacked and burned Hexham Abbey to the ground. By the end of the century, the Danes were masters of the southern part of Northumbria, all of East Anglia, most of Essex, and the eastern parts of Mercia.

Although Anglo-Saxon culture survived and prospered in the southwest of England for another two centuries, Northumbria as Bede knew it had ceased to be a political force in England. As the authors of *1066 and All That* might have put the matter, Wessex was now “top nation” in the Anglo-Saxon world and, therefore, for our purposes at least,

“History came to a . ”³

James Wesner

³ Walter Sellar and Robert Yeatman, *1066 and All That* (1930).

THE ANGLO-SAXON KINGDOMS, CA. 800

