

Evensong 17 November 2019

Today is one of the days on which the church has traditionally celebrated St Hild, or Hilda. Hilda was a princess of the Northumbrian household, which was Christian – she was baptised by Paulinus, Bishop of York. On reaching adulthood she decided to set off for France to take monastic vows, to dedicate her life to Christ, but Aidan, then Bishop of Lindisfarne, called her back to Northumbria. Here she lived as a solitary for a while before being asked to become abbess of a religious community at Hartlepool in 649. I guess she developed her skills here, and learnt how she might best use her gifts in the service of Christ. Eight years later, she founded a religious community at Whitby, for both men and women, which was governed by her as Abbess. Five bishops were trained there, and it became famous for its learning. Hilda's wisdom was well known, and she was asked for advice by both people in power and ordinary people. Her gifts of intelligence and analysis enabled her to influence many people, and help them to engage with the Way of Christ. She was also good at developing other people's gifts – notably those of Caedmon, a herdsman, who she encouraged to write down his Christian poetry.

Hilda is probably best known as the host of the Synod of Whitby in 664, in which those gathered from both Roman and Celtic Christian Churches argued and debated to decide upon a common date for Easter. There is a painting I like very much in the meeting room at the Whitby home of the Order of the Holy Paraclete which shows Hilda standing at a table surrounded by a range of other people – mainly men – arguing passionately about something. It looks much like any meeting you might attend today. Hilda argued in defence of Celtic customs, but when the Romans won the argument, she accepted the decisions of the Synod with grace, and worked hard using her influence to unite the Church across the land. She was an important leader.

Principled leadership is at the heart of the story we heard in our first lesson... The story is of Daniel, a leader, a man of power and potential, recognised by the King, who courageously takes a stand against the machinations of murderous rival politicians... But God is with Daniel – who has remained faithful to Him - and he survives their plot to have him killed. Then those who have plotted – and sadly, their wives and families – are thrown to the lions instead. And Daniel prospers. The rivals were willing to dispose of Daniel, a fellow human being, because he threatened their potential for power. They were all about their own success, while Daniel had the wellbeing of the people as his focus...

Hilda was willing to dispense with the trappings of royalty, and to follow Christ. She listened to the promptings of her heart, and the guidance of Bishop Aidan in seeking to serve Christ. She used her gifts to encourage and grow others in serving Christ.

The second story is very familiar – the story of the sower – spreading the message of the Kingdom – and all the many things that get in the way... the nature of the territory; the environmental challenges; the competing agendas. Nevertheless much of the message is heard and understood – and bears fruit.

Hilda engaged with those around her – convinced them to follow her in the monastic life – even when that must have seemed quite counterintuitive for the men at least. And when Hilda met with challenging circumstances, she argued her case but accepted what she saw as Gods will with grace

So what about us? This week we have entered into the general election period. There are plenty of leaders vying for our attention, arguing passionately for their different perspectives. Leaders with diverse policies and principles. Leaders offering very different visions of the future. The tests they - and we - are faced with include social, economic and political as well as environmental challenges. It is very easy to think that someone – unspecified - should do something.. Hilda took the initiative – though she listened to God. I suggest that like Hilda, we too are all leaders – each of us as Christians is called to listen to the promptings of our hearts in seeking to serve Christ, to hold a vision – focused on the left out - of a society in which love and justice are clearly visible, and to work with each other to build that Kingdom society.

Like Hilda, each of us is called to use all of our gifts to build the Kingdom – whether those gifts are number crunching or baking, listening or woodwork, sensitivity or humour. And those gifts will be better used in community – together – where the strengths of each, as Hilda found – can complement and cover any deficiencies.

And, like Hilda, each of us is also called to go out and share the good news of the Kingdom, at least among the people we see from day to day – to share the good news whatever the obstacles we encounter, with all of those that we meet, and to encourage and enable action, so that the seeds we plant bear abundant fruit of love, justice and peace for all.

Eternal God,
who made the abbess Hilda to shine like a jewel in our land
and through her holiness and leadership
blessed your Church with new life and unity:
help us, like her, to yearn for the gospel of Christ
and to reconcile those who are divided;
through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.