

WILFRID

Wilfrid, (634-709) is one of England's greatest and most controversial Saints, a towering figure on the stage of seventh century England; yet he stands very much in isolation, not like the ascetic missionaries Cuthbert or Aidan or the scholars like Bede. A friend of mine who teaches students about the early medieval world, tells me that Wilfrid is the one saint who most challenges their ideas of what a saint should be - proud where we expect humility, wealthy where we expect poverty, pushy where we expect gentleness.

Wilfrid was kicked out of his see no less than twice and on both occasions fought his sentence by appealing to Rome, travelling there and returning vindicated, in his opposition to those who would divide his diocese. But in the course of his travels, he evangelised not only the people of Sussex but also those of Frisia; one of the impressive things about Wilfrid is that when all seemed against him, when you or I might have been tempted to go and mope, when others treated like him went off to their monasteries, he went and did something useful, he went and told people about Christ.

Set against the picture of our land conjured up by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, against figures like Aidan and Cuthbert, exemplary bishops and pastors, passionate about souls but also about prayer, or against leaders of major communities of the religious like Hilda and Etheldreda who coped well with the politics of the time and yet seem unworldly figures, the panache and the sheer nerve of Wilfrid stand out. He defied kings probably rightly, but he also defied the great archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus, over dividing his see. His final testament with its provision that some of his money should go to keeping kings friends does not impress us too easily and his pursuit of the new and modern way of calculating Easter and his advocacy of the rule of Benedict make some a mite queasy.

He became Bishop of York with a See covering the whole of Northumbria, built magnificent stone churches at Ripon and Hexham and completed and restored the stone church at York started by the newly converted king Edwin. He acquired vast landholdings and established monasteries in Northumbria, Mercia, Sussex and the Isle of Wight and converted Sussex, the last vestige of paganism, to Christianity. His life was threatened many times, being shipwrecked and nearly killed by natives off the coast of Sussex, imprisoned in Northumbria by the king and twice nearly murdered whilst travelling abroad.

Born to a recently converted family in the kingdom of Northumbria, only recently united, at the age of fourteen, while in the service of the royal court, he came to the monastery of Aidan at Lindisfarne for four years. At the age of nineteen, after a year in Kent he made the pilgrimage to Rome and was much impressed by the order and the devotion he found there and by the newly reformed way of calculating the date of Easter, which had already been adopted by most of Christendom and not least by most of Ireland. On his way there he forms a lasting relationship with the church in what is now eastern France and in particular with the great Christian centre of Lyons. He learns about the new way of living the life of a monk associated with St Benedict. For all his love of the externals of religion, he is in his own life ascetic and devout and responds well to the new and the best available. He is devoted to the best we can give God in our worship and that meant the best music; when at one stage in his tumultuous career he is in prison his gaolers became aware of a light coming out of his cell and found him singing the psalms surrounded by light. He wants the best for the church and that meant new ways of doing things.

He returns to England, full of zeal to bring order and to improve the worship of the church; the son of the Northumbrian king gives Wilfrid the monastery at Ripon where the monks following the ways of the Irish are sent on their way; you can still see the crypt in which Wilfrid prayed. He takes part in the synod of Whitby which settles the date for Easter and strengthens the link between the English church and Rome.

Wilfrid is much criticised for his zeal in this area as if all he is about is subjugating a plucky native church to a foreign see, but there is little of substance in this view. If anything the big influence on Wilfrid was that coming out of what is now France, places where bishops had big dioceses, not little ones and where the church, unlike in England had been there long before the kings. Wilfrid knew how vulnerable the church was if it was too closely allied to kings and it needed resources of her own and linked across kingdoms. Some bishops in the south came from the same environment and Wilfrid was unusual in rising to power in the north with this influence. We also know that the prayers used by Wilfrid, the liturgy, was that of France not of Rome – when he blessed the bases of the columns at

Ripon he was doing something not found in the Roman liturgies of his age. His patron was not as you might expect from someone wholly given to Roman ways, St Peter, but St Andrew, the great patron of evangelists; he was a gifted missionary and knew the importance of gaining confidence and trust. When he came back to Sussex to a place where people had tried to kill him and which was as backward as you could get in the seventh century, he brought new technology; the land was starving because there had been a drought and the food of the people – eels – had gone and so he taught them to use nets so they could catch fish. He did not do this for a while and then move on; after he left Frisia he was to send his pupil from Ripon, Wilibrord, to Frisia and to consecrate him bishop. Wilfrid was a very practically minded saint, something which you see in that last will of his. If you see danger ahead for your flock, as he did for his monasteries and for the church, then you do something practical as well as pray.

Like those students of my friend at York, it is easy to be attracted to the clear holiness of Aidan or Bede or Etheldreda and to be put off by someone who like Wilfrid had his arms in the mess of the everyday up to his armpits. Yet this I think does him an injustice; Wilfrid is no flatterer of royal power and indeed it may be that in both England and in the France of his day he had seen how vulnerable the church and people were to the bloody infighting which passed for politics, that he put stress on the importance of a public order, whether this was through a net of monasteries which were not dependent solely on the local king and why the date of Easter was so important to him. Having two Easters threatened anarchy in a time when this was when you set your rents and your payments by. It is from Wilfrid that we get the practice of written documents for laws and from him the dating by the year of the Lord in public records.

Wilfrid is decried for his wealth and his love of pomp; when he is made bishop it is by Agilbert of Paris and he is consecrated by eleven bishops and then carried in a throne of gold. Yet this same Wilfrid when he returns to York and finally gets his see back, ensures that the bishop who is kicked out goes to be bishop of Lichfield; likewise when after the second exile he finally is restored to his monasteries and to his see, he is content that justice has been done and he hands over the pastoral care to new bishops. And this is also the one who is offered the see of Canterbury by the incumbent Theodore and declines it because it is something which should be decided in council, not be a private gift.

Wilfrid is a godly man and worthy of our reverence; one of the difficulties is that he may well have seen farther ahead than his contemporaries and reflected a church with a wider breadth than that of the land of his birth. One view; nothing for him was to be preferred to the worship of God and the community of those who are so called. In this he is true Benedictine. Wilfrid saw the dangers of letting the church and the state be too close and he realised that the church needed her own resources, lands and cash to be sure, if she was to be faithful to her witness, if she was to go to Frisia or to Sussex. The monasticism he brought with him was far more humane than that of the Irish, and its influence remains even in the Church of England today, namely the way of being a Christian after the rule of Benedict. Wilfrid chose the path of obedience to Christ; not pushy, but a bit obstinate. He knows what it is to have to be at risk. When faced with the choice of giving advice to queen Etheldreda to be faithful to her Christian calling, to keep to her vowed chastity or to keep in with his royal protector, he gives the advice and he is exiled as a result. He knows what it is to risk all and to have nothing to stand on, and he follows the One Who has given us all so we may be ready to risk all in the praise of God.

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