

St Hilda of Hartlepool

An Address to the Priests and Deacons Retreat to Walsingham

(February 6th 2018)

I need to start off by reporting a theft. My mother, a proud Yorkshire-woman (who like many proud Yorkshire people has spent the last 60 years living away from Yorkshire) will tell you that the people from her home county are all honest, upstanding folk. She's wrong because the culprits in this theft are from her county of origin. The people of Yorkshire are guilty of the theft of the cult St Hilda.

I used to work in Hartlepool. That's where Hilda was first an abbess, it was where she learnt the job and the place where some historians would argue she spent the greater part of her time even when running a dual site abbey. But how is she remembered today? St Hilda of *Whitby*. She has been stolen from the Hartlepudlians by the people Yorkshire. Her cause has been hijacked by the Yorkshire tourist board! It's not hard to see why the theft has been quite such an easy one. If you go to the site of Hilda's monastery in Whitby you will find a scene that is exactly what the romantic Celtic saint spotter wants to find – magnificent windswept headlands, beautiful coasts, big skies, large expanses of emerald-green grass, amazing vistas. By contrast if you go to the site of her monastery in Hartlepool you find slum housing, a dodgy chip shop, a taxi rank and rather less elegant views of the Tees Oil Refinery and an ageing nuclear power station. It's simply not pretty enough to sustain what the likes of David Adam have done to the memory of St Hilda.

For me though, it is precisely that gritty and ugly contemporary setting that makes the memory of the Northern saints so exciting and real. I remember as a student going to the Benedict Biscop's monastery in Sunderland to find towering over this ancient site the vast rusty gantries of the shipyards and the huge hulks of half built ships. The other part of that twin-site monastery, in Jarrow, overlooks a huge chemical plant and the massive ventilator shafts of the Tyne Tunnel. Likewise Hilda's first monastery was located in a place which now has amongst the highest deprivation rates in the country. In the north-east if you chip away the veneer of post-industrial sprawl, poverty and decay you uncover amazing lives of faith -

Hilda, Bede, Benedict Biscop, Caedmon, Aidan. And that surely takes us to the heart of an incarnational faith far more effectively than a couple of pretty trees and a circle prayer.

Of course a helpful stooge in the Yorkshire Hilda-heist is the lack of much information about Hilda's life. If you wanted strong evidence for the feminist claim that women have been eroded from history, try doing some research on Hilda. With Bede and Aidan the shelves are bulging. For Hilda we're dealing with scraps. And because there is so little hard evidence it is very easy to re-invent Hilda according to your own purpose or your own personal set of prejudices and opinions. And that's what many have done.

So for some Hilda is a role model of English pride, English nationalism and the distinctiveness and purity of the Church of England. In a famous book 'Leaders in the Northern Church' the nineteenth century Bishop of Durham, Joseph Lightfoot, argued that Hilda was part of a group of distinctively northern saints who evangelised northern England in a way that was free from the pressures and orders of Rome and in particular from the Papal mission of St Augustine. This, he argued, resulted in a pure form of English Christianity with its own, distinctive roots. This has proven to be a powerful thesis and I remember once in the States hearing a very articulate Episcopalian priest arguing that the Church of England was founded by St Aidan and finds its roots in his other disciples such as Hilda.

For others Hilda is one of those who inspire the modern craze for Celtic spirituality. Only a profoundly urban society disconnected from the reality of the living world could engender a spirituality which at times runs dangerously close to the animist in its desire to find encounter with God in the natural world. It is odd how a spirituality can be so far removed from its supposed influences. Where amongst contemporary proponents of Celtic spirituality can we find the overwhelming desire for conversion of self and others to Christ that we see in Hilda? The perception of Lindisfarne is an interesting case study. Modern day Celtic spirituality fans love to go there because they see it as a place of escape, of peace and quiet, a place to feed a spirituality that is for the most part insular and individualist. Yet Aidan chose that spot because it was the equivalent of the M25, a place from where it was easy to carry the Gospel by sea to as many people as possible.

For some Hilda is a feminist ikon, a woman who in a patriarchal culture was able to gain for herself by courage, determination and intellect a place of massive influence and leadership. For others she is rather the opposite, a meek and weedy stooge to Rome who rolled over all too easily, abandoned her Celtic roots and accepted the authority of Rome at the Synod of Whitby. Silence is dangerous because you can make of it what you wish.

So let's try and avoid all the controversy by asking a simple question. What does the life and witness of St Hilda have to tell us about living as priests and deacons today? And to answer that I want to think for a moment about the story of her life.

All we know about St Hilda is contained on three or four pages of Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People.' Hilda was born into noble blood in around 614 AD. Her father was Hereric who was the great nephew of King Edwin of Northumbria. When she was a small girl her father was driven into exile where he was eventually poisoned and it was during this time that Bede recalls a dream that Hilda's mother Breguswith had. In the dream Breguswith was desperately and forlornly searching for her husband but could find no trace of him. But finally, exhausted by her efforts, she found under her clothes a bright and brilliant jewel. As she looked at it more closely she saw it lighting up all of Britain with its brilliant splendour. This she knew was a prophecy about the life of her small daughter who would bring the light of the Gospel to a pagan land.

In 627, a very significant baptism took place in a wooden church in York. King Edwin had married Æthelburh who was a Christian and insisted that Paulinus, one of Augustine's missionaries and later Bishop of York, be her Chaplain. They brought Edwin to faith, and on Easter Day Hilda was one of those whom Paulinus baptised with King Edwin. It was a moment of monumental importance for the reconversion of this land.

Bede goes on to divide Hilda's life into two chunks, each neatly 33 years long. In the first part she lived a largely secular life about which we know very little. But at the age of 33 she decided to become a nun, initially wanting to join her consecrated sister in France. However Aidan persuaded her to stay in England, initially in a monastery somewhere on the River Wear. Later she moved to become the second Abbess of the monastery at Hartlepool and then in 657 she founded the monastery at Whitby, a twin-site establishment with

Hartlepool. Before her death she founded yet another monastery at Hockness, 13 miles from Whitby. It is hard to overstate the power and importance of these monasteries, places where men and women, married and celibate, shared in living the Christian life and proclaiming the Gospel. Whitby was a powerful place of learning with immense emphasis placed on study and on language. Bede talks about it as a place of 'Righteousness, mercy, purity and above all charity and peace.' The monks and nuns sought to live in accordance with the early church, holding all things in common and making no distinction between rich and poor. Above all it sought to equip people for the mission in a pagan country, and Hilda oversaw the formation of five Bishops at Whitby in addition to poets, scholar and musicians such as Caedmon. Her faithfulness was seen by local people to have elements of the miraculous, and there is an ancient story (though not one that Bede recalls) that Hilda dealt with a plague of snakes which she turned to stone through her prayer, thus causing the fossilised ammonites that are so plentiful in the beaches of north Yorkshire.

It is testimony to the power of Whitby that King Oswy chose the site for the Synod of Whitby in 664 AD. Bede's account of the Synod is wonderful reading with poor Bishop Colman, seeking to be faithful to the Irish tradition based (he claimed) on the authority of St John utterly destroyed and torn limb from limb by the quick-witted, keenly intelligent and often downright rude St Wilfrid who eventually trumped John, Columba and Colman with Petrine authority. It was game, set and match to Wilfrid, and Hilda was obedient to the decision of the Synod which reunited British Christianity in a way that was essential to the mission.

Hilda was sick with a fever for six desperate years before her death in 680AD. As she died, the bell in the monastery at Hockness started to ring of its own accord, so when messengers came with the news they found the nuns already praying for the repose of the soul of their inspirational foundress.

Even when you strip away the veneers of different re-imaginings over time, this is a remarkable life. To reflect on what it might say to us as priests and deacons today I want to think about three images. The bridge, the jewel and the snake. And associated with those

thee images I want to reflect on three ideas. The priest or deacon as reconciler (the bridge), as evangelist (the jewel) and as steward of the mystery (the snake).

So first Hilda as the bridge, a role that will help us to reflect on our own vocations as reconcilers. On reflecting on Hilda's own role as a reconciler most people will turn to the Synod of Whitby where the great division in the church over the date of Easter was resolved, but I can't help thinking that this is a bit of a re-imagining. Yes, Hilda may have hosted the Synod because of the power and (presumably) wealth of the monastery in Whitby, but there is no evidence whatsoever that she took any part in the conversations or was involved in the process of the Synod. It was called by King Oswy and was for the most part a conversation between Wilfrid and Colman. However there was a way in which Hilda was a bridge-builder and it is only indirectly related to the Synod. It has to do instead with language.

The language of the Church was Latin, however the language of the people was Anglo-Saxon. Hilda's monastery would have employed Latin in its study and its worship, and it would have been easy for them to be dismissive of the pagan Anglo-Saxon spoken by the local people. In fact the opposite was the case. Hilda and her community were great sponsors of Anglo-Saxon and identified people like Caedmon who could communicate the Gospel in that language. That means that she was a bridge builder between Christian and non-Christian worlds, and indeed between the literate wealthy classes who had Latin and the poor who spoke only Anglo-Saxon. She was a cultural bridge-builder, and that was what enabled and drove the mission.

Those with a sacramental ministry are called to be bridge builders. In the Eucharist we bridge heaven and earth. As we offer up bread and wine we bridge the gap by raising up human life to heaven. As we feed people with the body and blood of Jesus we bridge the gap by sustaining our people with the food of the angels. In the confessional we bridge the gap by making the reconciling work of the cross contemporary in ordinary lives and for ordinary people and so mend the relationship between the individual and God. Our vocation is to build bridges, and Hilda can show us how to apply that call in our daily ministry.

First like her we are called to bridge the gap between the church and a secular culture and to do so by speaking a language that people can understand. For the past four or five years I have been on the Archbishops' Evangelism Task Group and what fascinates me is the agenda. We speak endlessly about techniques and methods and how we can encourage and challenge people to share the Gospel effectively, but never once have we stopped to consider what that Gospel is. What is the content of our proclamation? The presumption is that the Gospel is a pick-up and drop message that you speak into any context regardless of circumstance. The trouble is that is so at odds with the ministry of Jesus who never 'proclaimed the Gospel' in that restricted sense. What he did was ask questions, understand lives and transform them with his presence. The Gospel is not a message, it is a person, Jesus Christ, and contemporary relationship with him. A message-based Gospel fails to connect with people because it does not stop to listen to the questions those people are asking. Instead we spend our lives articulately answering questions that nobody is asking any more, or questions that people were asking at the time of Luther and Calvin. If we want our proclamation to be effective, we need to start with a profound listening to context, because only then will we be able to answer the questions that people are asking. I met a keen evangelical curate a few weeks ago who is keen to start a drama group. 'We need to use drama to plant the right questions in people's minds,' he said. I admire his initiative, but I couldn't help asking myself 'Why don't we start by answering with the person of Jesus the questions that people are asking already?'

We have recently started an Estates Theology Project in which six estates clergy and six young professional theologians are going to spend a year working in pairs and listening intensely to the voices of estates residents. They will seek to understand the questions that are on people's hearts whatever those might be – family, work, place, sport, debt, transport, housing, education and so on. And then they will seek to discern where Jesus might be present in those situations and what the Good News is. The aim is to model a Biblical approach to mission that bridges the divide between the church and the culture and so emerge with a proclamation that actually makes sense and answers people's questions. The genius of the Catholic movement is our rootedness in our communities. We need to

take advantage of that to preach the Gospel in a way that people can understand, not by becoming simplistic or patronising, but by answering the right questions.

And second like Hilda we are called to bridge the gap between rich and poor. The centre of gravity in the catholic movement is very striking. The statistics suggest that two thirds of you here will be working in parishes that are in the 20% most deprived in the country. When I am asked to visit a catholic parish there is never much need for satnav. You head either for the red light district behind the station or the outer estate and the Anglo-Catholic Shrine will be there! We minister amongst the poor today just as we have always done.

We live in a culture that demonises and dehumanises the poor. Owen Jones's book 'Chavs' is a fascinating account of how the wartime perception of the working classes as Britain's hardworking heroes has been replaced by an attitude of derision and mockery such as we see portrayed in programmes such as Benefits Street, in a recent Panorama programme on Blackburn, in countless comedies and in the mass media. Successive governments have seen the poor as the problem and this has led to a culture of low pay, to the scandal of food-banking and the needless misery of Universal credit. The anger of those on the receiving end of has been made clear in recent elections, notably the vote on Brexit.

These are our people. These are the people we serve and for whom we have the cure of souls. In an atomised society where rich and poor live parallel lives and pointedly refuse to understand each other and where social inequality grows by the year it is our task to be bridge-builders. That means using our voice and our power to give a voice to the poor, it means being fearless in providing a prophetic social commentary, in means backing up our words by our lives as we serve and meet human need. I made a profoundly inspiring visit to the headquarters of Christians against Poverty in Bradford a few weeks ago. It was started by a man called John Kirkby who gave up a well-paid job to set up as a one-man debt counsellor because he was so furiously angry at the way the financial institutions treat the poor. The charity now employees 300 people has 600 branches all in local churches and is shameless in taking approach that doesn't just deal with people's financial problems but also addresses their spiritual needs as it combines service with proclamation. The size of the charity also enables it to raise with government issues around debt and it is developing a

powerful political voice. It is classic Gospel bridge-building and it would be wonderful see some catholic parishes setting up branches.

So that's Hilda as the bridge. Second I want to reflect on Hilda as the jewel whose radiance shone throughout Britain. It did so because of her courage in proclaiming the Gospel in a pagan culture and as we think of Hilda as the jewel we can reflect on our own vocation as clergy called to a ministry of evangelism.

Now I have to admit my research in this area is not vast, but there is no clear evidence that St Hilda ever ran a Messy Church. Or taught an Alpha group. Or led a mission weekend. Or gave her testimony at a men's pub night. However she was a powerful evangelist using the gifts she had. (And by way of parenthesis perhaps that's the first point we should make. We are called to use the gifts God *has* given us to be evangelists, not the ones he *hasn't* given us. If your gift is street preaching or pub nights, get on and do it. But if it is not that does not excuse you from evangelism. You just need to work out how God wants you to use the gifts he has given you). For Hilda those gifts were all about running the extraordinary twin site monastery at Hartlepool and Whitby as a place of prayer, a place of learning and a place where the upfront evangelists were trained.

Let's pick on one of those upfront evangelists to explain what I mean. Caedmon was a useless singer. He kept the cattle at the monastery in Whitby and was okay at that but had no real other gifts. When there were parties or dinners going on and the harp was passed round so that each person could sing their song, Caedmon used to escape back to his cattle to avoid embarrassment. Then one night, he had a dream in which a man said to him, 'Sing me a song. Sing about the creation of all things.' And Caedmon found himself singing this song. 'Praise we the fashioner of Heaven's fabric, the majesty of his might and his mind's wisdom.' When he woke up he remembered every word of the song and he went and sang it to the reeve. Amazed the reeve took him to see the Abbess Hilda who made him sing the song in the presence of many learned men. They gave him Bible passages and stories from the Gospel, and he turned these also into song. Hilda was astonished and ordered Caedmon to join the monastery where he received an education.

Caedmon sang in Anglo-Saxon rather than the learned Latin of the day and it would have been very easy for Hilda and the learned men to be haughty and snobbish. Instead though they encouraged Caedmon's gift and sent him out to sing the Gospel in a language people could understand. Hilda used the atmosphere of learning and prayer in the monastery to send out ordinary people who could sing the Gospel in language that could be understood.

That surely is the vocation of the priest and the deacon. We are called to be Hilda's who through our prayer, our learning, our wisdom and discernment, identify and send the Caedmons who can sing the Gospel in a language that people understand.

This will take a major mind-set change. In most parishes there is an unspoken collusion between clergy and laypeople that locks priests into roles they often don't much want and which restrict them from flourishing in ministry. Priests think that the parish is their sole responsibility and that nothing will quite go right if they are not at the heart of it. People are all too happy to let the priest do all the work and develop a consumer mentality in which they sit back and watch. People often entirely inappropriately use the language of power with regard to this situation as if clergy are somehow deliberately preventing their laypeople from doing anything because they don't trust them or want to keep them in their place. We know of course that the truth is far more complicated and that most clergy long for an active and involved laity but struggle to know how and where to start. In fact when I see clergy one of their desperate problems is finding good lay leaders. If only I had a decent treasurer or churchwarden or Sunday school leader or youth leader they say, life would be so much easier!

The heart of the Christian life is the baptismal identity that we all share, and that identity is one that sends us all to use our God-given gifts to build the Kingdom and call men and women to salvation. Local churches flourish when all share a vision and a responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel in word and action. Hilda can help us to address this with two mindset changes.

The first is to think not in terms of need but in terms of asset. To think, 'If only we had more families or a decent treasurer or more money in the bank' is forlorn and miserable and makes us feel depressed. Instead we need to think 'What has a bountiful God already given

us? What assets do I already have but am overlooking?’ Then the second mindset change is to think ‘Where are the Caedmons?’ Where are the people who can sing the Gospel in a language that others can understand, rough and ready though they may be.

Your task is to be Hilda, spotting and forming those potential evangelists and leaders. They may be people who have influence in your congregation but who have never been developed. They might be people who have not yet fully come to faith but need to be called to greater responsibility to complete that journey. Usually the leaders are there. We need to identify and call them. And when we have called them we need to trust them like Hilda did with Caedmon, let go, give away responsibility, take risks.

If we can see a prime task of the priest as being Hilda calling Caedmon, not only will you start to identify lay leaders but the massive vocations crisis we face as a movement will be eased. When it comes to the task of proclamation, you don’t need to do it all yourself, It is not your sole job to grow the church. Instead use your learning, use your discernment to identify some Caedmons, equip them and set them free. That’s when the Gospel will be sung in a language people can understand.

And third I want to reflect on Hilda as the one who tamed the snakes because this will enable us to explore the theme of the priest or deacon as a steward of the mystery. Medieval hagiographers loved to interlace the lives of saints with miracles such as Hilda turning the snakes to stone. It is very easy for the modern mind, even the Christian modern mind, to mock such stories as fanciful and pre-scientific. But actually there is a powerful message lying behind such stories. This is God’s world, the hagiographers are telling us, and he will control it and run it as he will. By allowing certain holy men and women to defy and overcome the laws of nature, he is showing us that these laws are his laws and they are not for us to over-explain or presume we understand. God is in charge of his world, and we’d better get used to that.

I think this is one reason why I have such deep problems with the contemporary fad for ‘Celtic spirituality.’ It can all too easily revert to the twee, tame, the complacently bourgeois. The Celtic saints prayed in the wild not because it was pretty but because it was utterly terrifying and completely untameable and massively out of their control. It reminded

them of God not because it made them feel peaceful but because it showed them that they were nothing at all in comparison with the vast and terrifying mystery of God's being, and yet that all powerful God has stooped down in Christ to redeem them. If you want authentic Celtic spirituality forget your circle prayers. Go to the north-east coast, pray the entire psalter by memory up to your neck in sea-water, have one meal a day of onions and be utterly alone for months on end. That's how to experience the awesomeness of God and the absurd miracle that he has chosen you.

Contemporary Celtic spirituality is symptomatic of a culture that turns on its head the mystery of God. Instead of confronting his awesomeness, we invent God according to our own liking. He becomes a consumer product. I was fascinated by a discussion with a group of clergy in which we were discussing what the cross tells us about the nature of God. One person started a sentence 'I want a God who...' Then the next person said, 'Well I want a God who...' and so it went on. We make God as we like him. This explains the theatre which is contemporary worship. Our worship, rather than being an obedient and Biblical response to God's majesty, has become a matter of taste in which you seek out a style which suits your own particular needs or which helps you to feel comfortable. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. Consumer worship indicates a consumer God. Today it is us who create God in our own image rather than vice versa.

Your task as the ordained is to recall people in ways that might shock and horrify and frighten back to the awesomeness and mystery of God. It is to remind them that we are a people under judgement, and that whilst the judge is merciful, he is also just. And how do we do that? It's hard. In UA Fanthorpe's poem 'Getting it Across' a slightly exasperated Jesus says,

*How can I cram the sense of Heaven's kingdom
Into our pidgin-Aramaic quayside jargon?*

It can be hard to find the words to express the celestial vision of who God is and what he has done for us. Of course we try to do it in our preaching and our teaching and by our personal example. We do it as we attend to our own personal formation and open our

hearts ever more to the mystery of God's being. But the only place we will come close to achieving it is in our worship.

Every time you celebrate the Mass – those of you who are priests – go to the altar as if it were for the very first time. Let every Mass be your first Mass.

Do you remember your first Mass? Do you remember that utter cold terror because your words and deeds were making the power of the cross contemporary? Do you remember your total concentration because you so wanted to get it right? Do you remember that profound sense that this, above all, was what God had called you to do? Do you remember the seeming timelessness of it and why it was your training incumbent had told you to leave your watch in the sacristy? And do you remember holding up that host for the very first time and looking at it and thinking, 'This in my hands is Jesus. This is my Lord, my God, my judge and yet my friend?' Do you remember that? And do you remember the intense and profound focus of the congregation who were so with you that it was almost as if it was their first Mass as well as yours? Do you remember that? You barely understood the gift of priesthood on that day, and yet that is probably the most effective act of priestly ministry you will ever in your life perform.

Every time you go to the altar, deacons as well as priests, pray that it might be just like the first time. Let it never be mundane or routine. Remember that what you are ministering is salvation itself. Heaven comes to earth at your hands. Bread becomes body at your hands. Sinful human beings are divinised at your hands. The creation is made new at your hands. Time meets eternity at your hands. Remember that every time you celebrate. Forget the servers getting it wrong or the organist playing badly or the chicken in the oven or Mrs Smith reading her bulletin when she should be praying. Put it aside. Because when you utterly believe and are completely focussed on the salvation you are ministering, your people will waken up afresh to the mystery of God-with-them. We make the Mass accessible not when we cheapen it but when we mean it. And it's fine to speak about the Mass being accessible because what that means is that it has become the vehicle for comprehending the utter mystery and power and beauty of the living God. He is everything. We are nothing. And when we realise that, he makes us everything.

The bridge. The jewel. The snake. The reconciler. The evangelist. The steward of the mystery.

St Hilda taught many people how to be priests and how to be Bishops – Bosa of York, Aetla of Dorchester, John of Hexham, Wilfrid of York, Otfor of Worcester. And still today she can teach us how to be Deacons and Priests and Bishops. By virtue of the resurrection the saints are contemporary with us. They are our friends. In fact as Bede reminds us, they are much more alive than us. Let's close with the last moments of her earthly life:

When Hilda had governed this monastery many years, it pleased Him who has made such merciful provision for our salvation, to give her holy soul the trial of a long sickness, to the end that, according to the apostle's example, her virtue might be perfected in infirmity. Falling into a fever, she fell into a violent heat, and was afflicted with the same for six years continually; during all which time she never failed either to return thanks to her Maker, or publicly and privately to instruct the flock committed to her charge; for by her own example she admonished all persons to serve God dutifully in perfect health, and always to return thanks to Him in adversity, or bodily infirmity. In the seventh year of her sickness, the distemper turning inwards, she approached her last day, and about cock-crowing, having received the holy communion to further her on her way, and called together the servants of Christ that were within the same monastery, she admonished them to preserve evangelical peace among themselves, and with all others; and as she was making her speech, she joyfully saw death approaching, or if I may speak in the words of our Lord, passed from death to life.

St Hilda of Hartlepool, pray for us. Amen.

+Philip Burnley