



Saints – Old and New Hilda

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Proverbs 8: 1–11

As an alumnus of St Hilda's College Oxford my choice of saint may seem somewhat predictable; so I should start with a confession. As an undergraduate I was not in the least impressed by Hilda: somehow she had taken on for me the garb of a rather earnest Victorian, someone towards whom I should feel gratitude even reverence, but who did not kindle in me any feelings of devotion. I nonetheless had to meet her in book three of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* since this was a set book for prelims, but so entangled did she seem to be in the controversy over the dating of Easter (which at the time I did not begin to understand) that I was all too eager to part company with her and to progress as fast as I could to saintly figures, such as St Bernard, to figures whose spoke with lyricism and passion and who seemed altogether more exciting than did Hilda and those dead snakes with which she was always depicted.

So why is it that today I have chosen St Hilda? It is precisely because she is not so much exciting as exemplary, and that is how, on the whole, I have come to prefer my saints. They should also – I owe the definition to the historian Alexander Murray – be both fearless and socially amphibious. And this St Hilda certainly was: as Bede tells us 'not only ordinary people but also kings and princes sometimes sought and received her counsel when in difficulties.' (iv.23) In such situations Hilda time and again fostered community and communication between discordant parties of the living. She also – and this to me is crucial – knew the importance of links with the dead. It is as peace-maker (in a violent era) and as a bridge-builder between the living and the dead that I venerate her.

St Hilda was the niece of a seventh century King of Northumbria. In 627, along with her uncle, Hilda became one of the first to be baptized as a Christian in Northumbria, but not long after this event the uncle was killed in battle and Hilda's own father murdered. At this point Hilda took refuge at the East Anglian court where her sister was queen, whence, according to Bede, she planned to depart to join a monastery in Gaul. But meanwhile there had been regime change at the Northumbria court and Hilda was now called back home and put in charge of the community of nuns the new bishop was establishing at Hartlepool. The success of the foundation was such that a further community was later founded, this time at Whitby (and another later, at Hackness).

Such was Hilda's reputation, that it was at Whitby in 664 that the vexed question as to how the date of Easter should be calculated was settled. Despite the fact that Hilda herself was on the losing side in this debate, so great was her diplomacy that the community itself does not seem to have suffered. On the contrary, it continued to flourish. Thus Whitby, under Hilda's rule became a remarkable seminary: five of its pupils, within Hilda's own lifetime became bishops and it took upon itself too a wider mission of evangelisation. It is when Hilda was abbess that the famous story of the cowherd Caedmon belongs.

Caedmon had joined the community at Whitby, as a layman, late in life, which was why (according to Bede) he had never learned any songs. Whenever there was a feast and he could see the harp approaching him he would slip away and go home. On one such occasion it was his turn to look after the cattle, so that rather than going home he went to the cattle byre and there he fell asleep. As he slept he dreamt that he was called by his name and told that sing he must. 'About what?' asked the bewildered Caedmon. 'About the beginning of created things.' And sing Caedmon did. When next morning the news reached Abbess Hilda, Hilda told Caedmon that he should now become a monk and henceforth devote himself to turning into 'melodious verse' 'the whole course of sacred history.'

Hilda's role in the spread of Christianity was thus crucial both through the bishops she educated and through the spread of the vernacular which she patronized. In modern jargon, she fostered both elite and popular culture. But to be a good saint a good life, is not – as I have suggested – quite enough. A good death is also essential and by that I mean that it is the role of the saint to bear witness at such a moment to the joining together of the living and the dead. If we return for a moment to Caedmon it is clear that he died well.... he was by then in the monastic infirmary; there he asked for the Eucharistic host, but before he ate it he established with his companions that they were all at peace with each other, and bore no outstanding grudges. Thereafter Caedmon lay down to wait for the singing to the night office and to die. This was, in Bede's words 'a beautiful ending'. But if we compare it with Hilda's death we will see that there is a particular way in which the saint – and by definition it must be a saint – who at the moment of his or her death, joins the living and the dead. Hence my second reading which I can perhaps recall to you. Hilda is not only kept company by her community; her death is also witnessed by the nun Begu from another of Hilda's foundation at Hackness who sees Hilda's soul borne aloft by angels. Further (but not in the extract I chose) another Whitby nun still in her probationary year (and so in a separate building) also sees Hilda's soul ascend to heaven 'in the company of angels'.

Among some of the most moving remains of seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England it seems to me are those stone slabs found notably in Hilda's first foundation at Hartlepool. These are small stones not much taller than a 12 inch ruler (and sometimes even smaller); on them is a cross and a name. They are not 'ordinary' grave markers since only one side of each slab has been worked; often, it seems, the stones were actually buried with the body, possibly as pillow stones, possibly as representations of books in which the dead have been commemorated. It may be speculation but it would be fitting if in her role as abbess, Hilda had set about to make sure no one would be forgotten at the Last Day.

Bede's *History* is full of the terrors of death. Not even Bede himself in his last days was entirely free of anxieties, often speaking 'of the soul's departure from the body' and reciting, we are told, an English poem:

Facing that enforced journey, no man can be
More prudent than he has good call to be,
If he consider, before his going hence,
What for his spirit of good hap or of evil
After his day of death shall be determined.

Even the holiest of men, such as the blameless Herebert, who seemingly had spent an apparently exemplary life as a hermit close the source of the river Derwent, lived in such fear of his end that he begged for the company of a saint – in this case Cuthbert – to accompany him on his final journey: ‘I beseech you by the Lord,’ he begged Cuthbert, ‘not to desert me....so we may cross together across the skies to behold his grace in heaven.’ (His wish would be granted and he died in the same hour as Cuthbert.) Thus that Hilda could have been seen twice over ascending directly into heaven ‘escorted by angels to the abode of eternal light’ is not just a remarkable testimony to her sanctity, it is of its essence. And this is why we above all need saints: it is they who create community between the living and the dead.

