

## **St Aidan's Feast Day**

The Rev. Dana VanVliet-Pullin, Deacon  
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church  
Virginia Beach VA 23452  
**September 4, 2016**

Today we are celebrating St Aidan's Feast Day with special music and guest Irish dancers and as you may guess I will be talking about St Aidan. Over the 3 years that I have been here at St Aidan's I have heard many stories about St Aidan and Lindisfarne where he built a monastery. So of course I thought what can I talk about today in a different way that will bring St Aidan's life ministries to the present time after 1364 years since his death.

I want to first talk a little about St Aidan's life for those who are new to our church St Aidan's. It all started in 633 when King Oswald of Northumbria was determined to bring Christianity to the pagans of his kingdom. From his fortress of Bamburgh, he sent messages to Iona asking for missionary monks to come and minister to his people so there was a conference held in Iona and of course St Aidan was there.

St. Aidan had moved to Iona from his birthplace in Ireland and while at the conference he talked about how ministry work should have been handled earlier in Northumbria and said to the one that had returned from Northumbria, *"Brother, it seems to me that you were too severe on your ignorant hearers. You should have followed the practice of the Apostles, and begun by giving them the milk of simpler teaching, and gradually nourished them with the word of God until they were capable of greater perfection and able to follow the loftier precepts of Christ."* This observation by St. Aidan convinced all in attendance that he was the man to attend to the missionary work in Northumbria.<sup>1</sup>

He arrived in Northumbria around AD 635 accompanied by 12 other monks and was established as Bishop of the area. King Oswald gave him the island of Lindisfarne, (now known as the Holy Island) for his Bishopric. Here St. Aidan established an Irish-type monastery of wooden buildings, a small church, small, circular dwelling huts; they believe he also built one larger building for communal purposes and workshops as needed. There the monks spent time in prayer and studious preparation before venturing out into the community to spread the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

St. Aidan tirelessly engaged in preaching and pastoral work. He traveled mainly by foot and visited all he came across. As St. Bede tells us; *"Whether rich or poor, if unbelievers, to embrace the mystery of the faith, or, if already Christians, he would strengthen them in the faith and stir them up, by words and actions, to alms and good works. He was accustomed not only to teach the people committed to his charge in church, but also feeling for the weakness of a new-born faith, to wander around the provinces, to go into the houses of the faithful, and to sow the seeds of God's Word in their hearts, according to the capacity of each."* <sup>1</sup>

In 642 AD, King Oswald was killed in battle against the pagan King Penda. King Oswin was appointed as Oswald's successor. He also supported Aidan's apostolate. St Aidan preached widely throughout Northumbria, traveling on foot, so that he could readily talk to everyone he met. King Oswin presented St. Aidan with a fine horse and trappings so the Bishop would no longer have to walk everywhere. No sooner had St. Aidan left the King's palace when he came across a poor man asking for alms. The bishop gave the man his new horse and continued on his way. King Oswin was most distressed when he heard. St. Bede has left us the following account; *"The King asked the bishop as they were going in to dine, 'My Lord Bishop, why did you give away the royal horse which was necessary for your own use? Have we not many less valuable horses or other belongings which would have been good enough for beggars, without giving away a horse that I had specifically selected for your personal use?' The bishop at once answered, 'What are you saying, Your Majesty? Is this child of a mare more valuable to you than this child of God?'* <sup>1</sup>

St. Aidan died in 651AD after serving 16 years in his episcopate. It is said that he had become ill and a tent was constructed for him by the wall of a church. He drew his last breath while leaning against one of the buttresses on the outside of the church. This beam survived unscathed through two subsequent burnings of the church and at the church's third rebuilding, the beam was brought inside the church and many reported miracles of healing by touching it.<sup>1</sup>

What St. Aidan had achieved may not have been clear to him at death but subsequent history showed the strong foundations and lasting success of his mission. The missionaries trained in his school went out and worked for the conversion of much of Anglo-Saxon England. St. Aidan's feast day was on August 31st.<sup>1</sup>

I don't know if this has been mentioned over the years but I found out that St. Aidan's crest is a torch, a light shining in the darkness, since 'Aidan' is Gaelic for 'fire'. I thought that was something to note because for us at St Aidan's we do not use the sign of fire as a light shining in the darkness but use the beacon of a lighthouse for all who are seeking God, how appropriate as we represent St Aidan to the world.

So let's look at how we can take St Aidan to the world. We heard that St Aidan travelled ceaselessly spreading the gospel to both the Anglo-Saxon nobility and to the socially disenfranchised'. To me this idea of spreading the gospel to all in society is crucial as we strive here at St Aidan's to be the church that is inclusive and accessible. It seems that Aidan models for us a love, care and desire to spread the gospel to the whole of society from the richest to the poorest that no one is excluded. Aidan patiently talked to people at their own level and they say it was why he was selected at the conference in Iona when he said, "*You should have followed the practice of the Apostles, and begun by giving them the milk of simpler teaching, and gradually nourished them with the word of God until they were capable of greater perfection and able to follow the loftier precepts of Christ.*"

The idea of talking to others at their own level doesn't mean being patronizing or feeling like you are talking down to them, it means meeting people as they are, discerning their needs, being patient with people and showing no judgment. This is how Jesus spoke to many of those whom He encountered in His ministry, He met them as they were and spoke to them sometimes with reassurance, sometimes using parables and contexts people could easily relate to, and sometimes He challenged and rebuked when necessary. But no one was excluded and people were spoken to with love, respect and care.<sup>2</sup>

We are not all called to spread the gospel in such an explicit way as Aidan, but we are all called to bear witness to that Gospel message in the way we live our lives and this should be a life of love and service to all people.<sup>2</sup>

Aidan didn't give up on people and neither should we. We need to be there when people need us, that our backs are not turned and that we haven't closed a door and walked away. Aidan gave his time, his respect and perhaps most importantly his love to those on the margins of society and we too are all called first and foremost to love as Christ loved to those on the margins of society. I am told as a Deacon if I am not living on the edge I need to relocate.

I believe the homeless ministry we have in downtown Norfolk is one that St Aidan would have been involved in, he would be standing right alongside of us as we reach out to help and feed the homeless. I know this ministry is not in downtown Virginia Beach, but Virginia Beach does not allow churches to set up tables and feed the homeless outside. They want the homeless to come inside where it is warm in the winter or cool in the summer, they don't want the homeless to be gathered all together in one place, it will look bad for the tourists. But we need to be where they are, where they spend their days in the 100 degree

temperatures, the freezing rain, the cold snow and the below freezing temperatures. We need to share time with them where they are not where we feel comfortable, and I believe St Aidan would be blessing us right now for we are doing to help the marginalized. This Norfolk ministry is our way to reach out and become the face, the hands and feet of Christ in the world they live in. We make their sandwiches on the third Sunday of every month after the late service and go to Norfolk to feed them and help with their needs on the last Saturday morning of every month.

St Aidan's life was a life of humility and a life of service which echoed the life of Jesus Himself. I pray that we leave this place inspired and challenged to reflect upon how we can use St Aidan's example to reach out to those around us and bear witness to the unconditional love of God in our own lives.

I would like to close with a collect for St Aidan:

Everlasting God,  
you sent the gentle bishop Aidan  
to proclaim the gospel in this land;  
grant us to live as he taught  
in simplicity, humility and love for the poor;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord  
Amen<sup>2</sup>

1. <http://www.staidanschurch.org/staidan.html>

2. <http://teamparishoflouth.org.uk/the-life-and-work-of-st-aidan-an-example-and-a-challenge/>