

St. Aidan's day 2018
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I am always happy on this Sunday when lectionary year B rolls around. The readings for this week are perfect for a celebration of Aidan of Lindisfarne our patron saint. In particular the passage from James and the Gospel for today are very appropriate.

The collect for St. Aidan tells you a little about him. "O loving God, you called your servant Aidan from the peace of a cloister to re-establish the Christian mission in northern England, and endowed him with gentleness, simplicity, and strength: Grant that we, following his example, may use what you have given us for the relief of human need and may persevere in commending the saving Gospel of our Redeemer Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever."

Aidan, like Patrick and Columba before him, set up not churches, but monasteries. In Celtic Christianity an abbot had a higher standing than a bishop. Their life was focused on abbeys and monasteries. Most of this part of England were small villages at best. The Roman style of conversion was to come into an established city, build a church and convert the people. They only went where people were already "civilized" and educated. The first Celtic bishop Columba had gone out and declared that the people of this land, known as Picts, were not yet ready to be converted and he quit! He gave up because the people did not seem worthy to him of hearing God's word.

According to the Venerable Bede in his history of the English people, "Aidan said, "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." At this point those at the conference to find a new bishop to send, knew that Aidan was their man.¹

An inspired missionary, St. Aidan would walk from one village to another, politely conversing with the people he saw, slowly interesting them in Christianity. By patiently talking to the people on their own level, Aidan and his monks slowly restored Christianity to the Northumbrian communities.

When Aidan would found a monastery he was building more than just a worship space. He was establishing a permanent presence in the community. He would train local boys to become monks. He supported women in the role as abbesses at these abbeys. He helped Hilda establish an abbey that would produce 11 bishops. It is reported that he

¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Penguin Books, London, England rev 1990 pg. 151

even converted some bandits into monks so powerful was his witness to Christ. The monastery would eventually include a school, hospital, and provide a market place to develop commerce. Most of all, the monastery allowed a community to form which cared for the people of the area. Aidan understood, just as Desmond Tutu did, that the hungry stomach, the hurting body does not hear the word of God until the stomach is filled and the body healed. The monastery at Lindisfarne he founded grew and helped found churches and other monasteries throughout the area. It also became a center of learning and a storehouse of scholarly knowledge.

Eugene Peterson translates a portion of our James passage as “Don’t fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. *Act* on what you hear!” James 1:17-27.²

Aidan was authentic in his practice of Christianity in particular the Celtic version. He was just the opposite of what Jesus was criticizing in the gospel. Aidan was the real deal. There is a famous legend that King Oswald gave him a beautiful horse and saddle saying that he should not have to walk. Aidan was no more than a half-mile from the castle when he got off the horse and gave it to a poor peasant he encountered who had no horse. Oswald was furious but Aidan simply reminded him that it is what our Lord would have done. This what being a doer of the word truly means.

I believe that in a world where the church is often portrayed in a negative light, and there is a lot of that going on right now authenticity is the key. Living the gospel is more important than preaching it. There is the famous quote of St. Francis, “preach the gospel at all times use words only when necessary.” Taking the time to speak of our faith is important. Most importantly we need to touch people where they are in their lives.

Earlier this week I had a young man come up to me when I was out and about. I had seen him a couple days before when I was at the same place. He caught me at the door and said, “Pastor, um I mean Father, what do I call you?” I told him it really didn’t matter. Then he asked, “I’m trying to figure something out. I mean what is purgatory, does it exist. I’m worried about getting into heaven, all this stuff is confusing.” He was old enough to have studied some world history and new about the Reformation but didn’t connect it with the start of the Protestant churches. It was clear that he had some church background but not much. He had enough to be worried that heaven was out of his reach. Most importantly he had nobody to ask. He told me he had talked with some priests on line, but they wouldn’t give him a straight answer.

As I talked with him I realized that he was at a point in his life where he was worried about what would eventually happen to him. What he needed more than anything else was to hear that God loved him and no matter what mistakes he had made, God forgives him. I didn’t get theological with him, just told him that God already loves and forgives him and asks him try to live a good life. He didn’t need much more than something that simple at the point he was at. I have no idea why he was there, I don’t

² This translation is from the Message by Eugene Peterson

even know his name. As I read about Aidan, I suspect that may be the approach that he would have used as he walked through the countryside. Aidan is a model of evangelism that we can all use and our mission in vision asks us to reach out to people in the community.

As we go through the rest of our liturgy look for that message of God's love and care for us and for creation. The service today is from Iona the island where Aidan was trained and is rich in Celtic symbolism. Celtic Christianity is very creation centered seeing God in everything and everyone. Aidan was steeped in that tradition rather than the Roman tradition because Iona had been cut off from much of the development of the Roman world once the Roman Empire fell and the Vikings and other invaders ravaged the country.

Also listen for the words that acknowledge that we have all made mistakes and nobody comes to the table a perfect person and that is ok. Aidan like God, like Jesus accepts everyone, invites everyone and loves everyone regardless of where they are on their spiritual journey. We would all be better Christians, better people if we followed the ways of Aidan of Lindisfarne.