

St Cuthbert's Pilgrim Church

Rededication of St Cuthbert's Church Ackworth

Pentecost Sunday May 11th 2008

My first clear memories of this glorious church go back to one of those wonderful (and all too rare) balmy summer days when the builders were still toiling over St Cuthbert's. Stripped to the waist they were working, with God's grace, to put everything to rights. My guess is that they enjoyed working on an ancient and holy place and learnt much about it in the process. Much of how we see the church now dates back to the re-building by Hugill in 1855. But the tower is fifteenth century and there is old work in the porch with its stone roof and rib vaulting.

I'd like to begin with the porch and the effigy of St Cuthbert, your patron. The saint is giving a sheaf of corn to the birds. Now I don't know whether the custom continues, but it used to be the case that twice a year a sheaf of corn is tied to his bishop's staff to remember the fact that his body reputedly rested here in its long wanderings before it found peace in Durham Cathedral.

You are hugely blessed in your patron. Some churches are dedicated to saints whose existence, unlike Cuthbert's, is now lost in the mists of time. Travel northwards towards Scotland and there is much to discover. Stop at Durham Cathedral and there, behind the high altar is the shrine, hallowed by countless pilgrims over the centuries. On both Inner Farne, near Bamburgh and on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, there are places where he lived and prayed. Then there is St Cuthbert's cave near Berwick – and finally there is Melrose Abbey where he was a novice. St Boisil, his abbot, gives his name to the little town of St Boswell's nearby.

Why so many holy places and what might it matter to you here at Ackworth? Most importantly, Cuthbert's holiness is still legend. A monk, a bishop and a hermit, he helped shape the Christian community in Northumbria. In his book, *The life of Cuthbert*, the Venerable Bede recounts many tales and miracles attributed to the saint. Remembering your porch, the sheaf of corn and the birds, there is the tale of his saving the crops. He planted barley having ploughed the land. Even though it was long past rogation tide – that is at this time of year, the barley sprouted and grew. But the birds – as ever- were a pain, eating up the crops. 'Why are you eating crops you yourself did not grow?' Cuthbert asked the birds. 'Perhaps you have greater need of them than I. If God has given you permission, then do as he bade you; if not, be off with you, stop damaging other people's property.' They flew off at his first word and did no further damage. Perhaps we could learn Cuthbert's technique in dealing with lead theft!

Now I tell you that tale since it is part of the remarkable tapestry of life that Cuthbert lived out in the gospel. Cuthbert came from the Celtic or Irish monastic tradition. Monasteries were powerhouses from which missionaries would make forays. Often they were set in wild and inhospitable country. Cuthbert was courageous, but he was also practical. All the tales of his life and miracles are set in a severely practical world. He puts out fires, plants crops, heals the sick. He lives a pilgrim life, always on the road.

He is a wonderful model for us on this day. First of all this remarkable restoration offers you an amazing base. Like Melrose and Holy Island, it offers you somewhere from which to live out and spread the gospel. Ackworth has been a fantastically holy place. Associations with Cuthbert hint at the gospel being lived here from the seventh century onwards. This church marks itself out as a place of holiness of at least eight hundred years' pedigree. Then John Fothergill set up the great Quaker school, first as a foundling's hospital. Fothergill's severely practical application of the gospel stands four square in the tradition of Cuthbert.

But the second reason why Cuthbert goes well with this day is that we celebrate Pentecost. Our readings offer a powerful challenge to which we must respond. First we hear the extraordinary story of the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. Then we hear of the different gifts of that Spirit: wisdom, service, teaching, prophecy and so on. Cuthbert and his fellow workers were living examples of this. Then finally, Jesus in John's gospel inspires them, in the literal sense of that word. He breathes God's grace into them: 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'

Today is not just a completion. It is instead a dramatic beginning. How can you use this wonderfully restored base camp, this powerhouse to live and speak the gospel with vigour? How about beginning with a pilgrimage to the places where Cuthbert lived and died. Cuthbert was a pilgrim even after his death. For fear of the Danes his body moved across northern England by legend here to Ackworth. When you return from that pilgrimage you may be inspired, filled with the Spirit, to find new ways of telling the story of Jesus Christ here in this place. Remember *that* each time you pass Cuthbert in the porch – striding out with his staff to tell of God in Jesus.

Amen

READINGS

Acts 2: 1-21

I Cor.12: 3b-13

John 20: 19-23