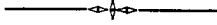


of the Eternal. And the more we cultivate the habit of sympathetically examining the actions and the beliefs of others, the riper we shall ourselves grow for an eternal home, in which not a Presbyterian, not a Baptist, not a Wesleyan, not an Anglican will be found, just because channels and ducts will be superseded when we reach the hidden source of grace and truth.

ALFRED PEARSON.



### ART. III.—OUR FATHERS IN THE FAITH.

#### ST. AIDAN.

**D**ARK days had fallen upon the great kingdom of Northumbria, and the fair name of the Christ was wrapped in the gloom of heathen carnage. In the year A.D. 633 Penda the Strenuous, the pagan King of Mercia, had joined forces with Cadwallon, King of the Britons, and had slain the great Edwin on the then marshy flatland of Heathfield (Hatfield), in south-east Yorkshire.

“When Edwin had ruled most gloriously for seventeen years, during six of which he was a soldier of the kingdom of Christ, Cadwallon, King of the Britons, rebelled against him, being assisted by Penda, a most strenuous man of the Mercian royal family, and a severe battle having been fought in the plain which is called Heathfield, Edwin was killed and his whole army either slain or dispersed.”<sup>1</sup>

But worse things were to follow. After the death of Edwin two princes of the Northumbrian line contrived to hold the kingdom for a while. Osric, Edwin’s cousin, ruled in Deira, the southern province of Northumbria, whilst Eanfrid, a son of Ethelfrid the Destroyer, received the northern province of Bernicia. Both had been baptized—the former “by the preaching of Paulinus had been initiated in the sacraments of the faith,” and the latter, who during the reign of Edwin had been in exile among the Scots, had there been “renewed by the grace of baptism.”<sup>2</sup>

But alas for their constancy! “Each of these kings,” says Bede, “when he obtained the insignia of an earthly kingdom, abandoned and anathematized the Sacraments of the celestial kingdom in which he had been initiated, and allowed himself to be polluted and destroyed by the filth of his former

<sup>1</sup> Bede, “Hist. Eccl.,” ii. 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, iii. 1.

idolatry."<sup>1</sup> But they received their reward. For "after no long time Cadwallon, King of the Britons, slew them both with impious hand but with just vengeance."<sup>2</sup> Osric was killed the very next summer whilst rashly attempting to besiege Cadwallon at York, and Eanfrid a few months later met the same fate through the treachery of the Briton, to whom he had come with twelve men to sue for peace. It is little wonder, then, that Paulinus, Bishop and Pastor of Christ's sheep in Northumbria, deemed prudence to be the better part of valour. It may have been that he thought it his first duty to see the widowed queen safely out of danger; but, whatever the cause, he evacuated his position and accompanied Ethelburga and her children by sea to Kent.

And now the light of Christianity flickered fitfully in the desolate province; the name of one man alone remains who served to keep it even kindled, James the Deacon, a splendid example of noble courage and simple trust, "a man in all respects ecclesiastical and holy, who, remaining a long time after in that Church, rescued great spoil from the old enemy by preaching and baptizing . . . and being an old man and full of days, in the words of the Scripture, went the way of his fathers."<sup>3</sup>

But night is darkest before dawn, and long ere James died the joyful news reached him that Oswald, a younger brother of Eanfrid, had come to raise the standard of the Cross victoriously against the pagans. Heavenfield must follow Heathfield. Oswald "having with an army, small indeed, but fortified with the faith of Christ, surprised the wicked King of the Britons, destroyed him together with those immense forces which he boasted none could resist."<sup>4</sup>

The morning sun was beginning to rise when, a cross having been hastily made and a pit dug in which to place it, Oswald himself, glowing with faith, seized it and placed it in the pit and held it up with both hands until the soldiers had heaped the earth around it. And then, raising his voice, he cried aloud to his army: "Let us all bend our knees and join in beseeching the omnipotent, living, and true God that He in His mercy will defend us from a proud and vengeful enemy; for He knows that we have undertaken a just war for the safety of our country."<sup>5</sup> And so they gained the victory as their faith deserved.

Thus it was that Oswald commenced a reign which was marked no less by his own piety and generosity than it was, as we shall see, by the beautiful ministry of St. Aidan.

<sup>1</sup> Bede, "Hist. Eccl.," iii. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, iii. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*                      <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, iii. 2.

Oswald's first care was to restore the national Christianity which had fallen on such evil days. For this he needed a Bishop, and for a Bishop he naturally applied to the Northern Celtic Church, in which he, like his apostate brother Eanfrid, had found a home during the days of his exile, and had received baptism. It is important to notice this point. For the fact that an English King of the year A.D. 634, when in want of a Bishop, should apply, not to the Augustian or Roman Church which was flourishing in Kent, but to the Columban or Celtic Church, and that Aidan was "venerated by the Roman Bishops themselves,"<sup>1</sup> clearly indicates the wide difference between the claims of Rome at that period and her claims under the arrogant rule of a Nicholas or a Hildebrand some centuries later.

In answer to Oswald's request, Seghine, abbot of the monastery at Iona, sent Cormac into Northumbria. Cormac, however, possibly on account of his own austere and harsh disposition, found the heathens more intractable than he could wish, and their rude indocility drove him back to Iona in disgust. A council of the monks was immediately held, "they being desirous to afford to the nation those means of salvation for which they had been asked, but grieving because the preacher whom they had sent had not been received."<sup>2</sup> Cormac had stated his grievances, when a voice was heard addressing him: "It seems to me, my brother, that you have been too hard with your unlearned hearers, and have not fed them first, according to apostolic rule, with the milk of easier doctrine, until by degrees, being nourished by the Word of God, they should be capable of receiving the more perfect, and of performing the more sublime, precepts of God."<sup>3</sup> All eyes were turned upon the speaker—a monk named Aidan; his short speech, full of wisdom, was eagerly discussed, and all agreed that he was the very man required, that he "was worthy of the episcopate, and ought to be sent to teach the unbelieving and unlearned, since he was proved above all things to be endued with the grace of discretion, which is the mother of virtues."<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, Aidan arrived in Northumbria in the summer of A.D. 635, and at his own request was presented by the King with the island of Lindisfarne for an episcopal seat. It is probable that the new Bishop chose this spot above all others, partly on account of its likeness to Iona and its facilities for devotional retirement, being, as it was in those days, "by the flow and ebb of the tide daily twice surrounded by the sea like an island, and twice joined to the land by the

<sup>1</sup> Bede, "Hist. Eccl.," iii. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, iii. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

shore being left dry,"<sup>1</sup> and partly he would choose it for the sake of the protection afforded by the royal fortress of Bamborough, which towered majestically above it. Here, then, it was that Aidan began a sixteen years' ministry which, distinguished by an absolute devotion, has probably never been surpassed in simple and unassuming piety.

"In entering upon his episcopate, he neither sought nor received any sanction from Rome or Canterbury; he was a missionary Bishop sent from the neighbouring Scotie Church at the request of the Northumbrian King; this was his position, and he would never have admitted the principle that all episcopal jurisdiction must be derived from Rome, or that a Pope had a right to make an English Archbishop supreme over all the Bishops of Britain. Yet Rome acknowledges him as a canonized Bishop."<sup>2</sup>

Aidan's first care was to obtain helpers and fellow-workers like-minded with himself, who might aid him in his duties and make his labour more efficient. He therefore sent over to his old home, and from that time Irishmen began to come over daily and to preach the Word with great devotion; churches sprang up in various places; the people gladly flocked together to hear the good news of the kingdom, and possessions and lands were given by royal donation for the founding of monasteries.

But this was not all. The Bishop knew well enough that preaching and visiting among the sheep of his flock was but a small part of his work; it was equally, if not more important, to look after the lambs and train them in the Christian faith, if so be they might in time to come themselves become shepherds. And so we find that, not only were the younger children instructed in elementary knowledge, and those who had arrived at maturer age trained in more advanced studies and regular discipline by Irish teachers, but Aidan himself, in the early days of his episcopate, formed a school of twelve boys taken from the Angles to be instructed in the knowledge of Christ, and prepared for the ministry under his own special care. Among these twelve boys may be mentioned Eata, who some forty years later occupied the episcopate of Lindisfarne, and St. Chad, afterwards first Bishop of Lichfield.

Moreover, Aidan, who never used for his own benefit the gifts bestowed upon him by the rich, dispensed portions of them for the ransoming of slaves; "in short, he made many whom he had redeemed by paying a ransom his own disciples, and by his teaching and instruction advanced them even to the degree of priest."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bede, "Hist. Eccl.," iii. 3.    <sup>2</sup> Bright, "Early Eng. Ch. Hist.," p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> Bede, "Hist. Eccl.," iii. 5.

Such were the chief features of Aidan's sixteen years' episcopate. What was the secret of his success? The true answer to this question is suggested by the fact that we have no record of a single sermon he preached, for it was his simple and Christ-like life rather than the eloquence of his sermons that won the Northumbrians over to Christianity. "His doctrine was most chiefly commended to all by the circumstance that he himself taught not otherwise than he and his followers lived."<sup>1</sup>

Let us glance for a moment at the little Bede tells us of his character. "He was a man of great gentleness, piety, and moderation."<sup>2</sup> "For he cared not to seek anything or to love anything of this world."<sup>3</sup> "Never through fear or respect did he fail to reprove the rich if they had offended in aught, but corrected them with a severe rebuke."<sup>4</sup> He never descended to what was an all too common method of obtaining influence in those days: he never gave money presents to the powerful of this world. And if, on the other hand, kings or rich men gave him presents, he would distribute them amongst the poor, or spend them, as we have said, in ransoming slaves. The very keynote of his life was simplicity; the king knew him too well to invite him to his entertainment except on rare occasions, when Aidan would partake scantily of the richly-furnished board, and immediately hurry away to read or pray with his attendant monks. It was on one of these occasions that a silver dish full of royal dainties was placed before the king, when, as the bread was being blessed by Aidan, one of the servants, to whom was entrusted the care of the poor, entered, and told the king that a great number of poor people were sitting in the streets asking alms of him. Oswald immediately ordered the dish of meats before him to be carried out to them, and even the dish itself to be broken and the pieces distributed. Seeing which, the Bishop, who sat next him, being delighted, seized his right hand, and exclaimed, "May this hand never wither." "Which," adds Bede with rare simplicity, "also happened according to the wish expressed in his benediction. For when he was killed in battle, his hands and arms being cut off, it came to pass that unto this day they remain uncorrupted. In short, they are kept enclosed in a silver casket in the church of St. Peter, in the royal city which is called by the name of a former queen, Bebba, and are venerated with due honour by all."<sup>5</sup>

Even when pursuing his arduous parochial duties and travelling throughout his diocese, whether town or country,

<sup>1</sup> Bede, "Hist. Eccl.," iii. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, iii. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, iii. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, iii. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, iii. 6.

he would go not on horseback after the usual manner, but on foot, in order that he might the more easily turn aside to all, whether rich or poor, whom he saw in the distance, and engage in conversation with them; if they were heathen, convert them; or if believers, strengthen them in the faith.

Nor was Aidan one to lose the precious moments which with men less careful of their time so often slip away between one piece of work and another, for during his pastoral rounds he would (and he obliged those with him, whether cleric or lay, to do likewise) meditate upon passages of Scripture, and in spare moments learn Psalms.

Truly he was a man who in Bede's words "was careful to omit nothing of all those things which from the evangelical, prophetic, and apostolic writings he had learnt ought to be done, but to fulfil them all in his works according to his ability."<sup>1</sup>

The first seven years of Aidan's episcopate must have been happy indeed, showing as they do a true co-operation of crown and mitre in the service of the Master. For Oswald, who used to listen humbly and willingly to the Bishop's admonitions in all things, was not behindhand in his care and diligence to build up the Church of Christ in his kingdom. And it must have been a truly beautiful sight, as Bede says, to watch the king, who was master equally of Scotch and of English, standing beside Aidan, who had not perfectly learnt the latter language, and interpreting his sermons to the members of the Court.

But a deep sorrow awaited the Bishop. Oswald, getting involved once more in a dispute with Penda, was surprised by the heathen king at Maserfield, and on August 5, 642 A.D., beset on every side by weapons and enemies, fell with a prayer for his army upon his lips. "'Lord, have mercy on their souls,' said Oswald, falling to the ground."<sup>2</sup>

Penda with cruel ferocity exposed the head and hands of the saintly king upon stakes. But Oswy, coming a year later with an army, recovered them, and Aidan buried the head of his beloved master under the shadow of his own little church at Lindisfarne.

And now the great kingdom of Northumbria, so successfully welded together by Oswald, was once more divided, Oswy, a younger brother of Oswald, ruling in Bernicia, and Oswin, son of Osric, in Deira.

Whatever may be said of the former, Oswin at any rate, with his gentle and saintly disposition, would remind Aidan more and more of the dear master he had lost, and in

<sup>1</sup> Bede, "Hist. Eccl.," iii. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* iii. 12.

describing Aidan's work it is with Oswin we chiefly have to do.

Penda's grudge against Northumbria was not satisfied by the slaughter of her king, but, gathering his forces together once more, he marched against the royal fortress of Bamborough. And because he could not take it by force, he heaped beams, rafters, roofings, thatch, and all the inflammable material he could lay hands on against the high wooden walls of the fortress, and, having waited for a favourable wind, set them alight. Then Bede pictures Aidan from his retreat on the island of Farne, watching the smoke and flames rising above the walls of the city. "'See, Lord,' he exclaimed, 'what evil Penda is doing.' And immediately the wind changed, and hurled back the flames upon those who had kindled them, so that some being hurt, and all being terrified, they no longer attacked a city which they perceived to have been favoured with Divine protection."<sup>1</sup>

There is little more to tell of Aidan's life; one story, however, is told so pathetically by Bede that it must not be omitted. The Bishop had been accustomed, as we have seen, to make his circuits on foot. But Oswin, thinking that the wintry torrents and trackless moorlands of Yorkshire would prove too much for his strength, insisted on presenting him with a very excellent horse. A short time after, Aidan, meeting a poor man who asked an alms, dismounted, and ordered the horse, richly caparisoned as it was, to be given to the beggar, "for he was very compassionate, and a cherisher of the poor, and, as it were, a father of the wretched."<sup>2</sup> When this came to the king's ears he was naturally annoyed. "How came it, my Lord Bishop, that you gave a royal horse which you ought to have for yourself to a poor man? Had we not very many horses of less value which would have been sufficient to give to the poor without your parting with the horse which I chose for your special possession?" To which the Bishop replied: "What say you, O king? Is that son of a mare dearer to you than that son of God?" Then they went in to dine. The Bishop took his seat at the table, but the king, who had come in from hunting, stood by the fire warming himself, when suddenly he threw himself at Aidan's feet, asking pardon. "For never again," said he, "will I mention the subject, or judge what or how much of our money you may give to the sons of God."

The Bishop, seeing the sudden change in Oswin's temper, was alarmed, and immediately raised him, assuring him that he was quite reconciled, and begging him to sit down to his

<sup>1</sup> Bede, "Hist. Eccl.," iii. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, iii. 14.

meat and lay aside his sorrow. But whilst the king recovered his joyousness, Aidan grew sad and even shed tears. Seeing this, one of his attendants asked him in the Irish language, so that no one in the hall should understand, why he wept. "I know," said Aidan, "that the king will not live long, for I never before saw a king humble. Whence I perceive that he is soon to be taken from this life, for the nation is not worthy of such a ruler."<sup>1</sup>

The event soon proved the Bishops foreboding to be correct, for Oswin, getting involved in some dispute with Oswy, was treacherously murdered at the instigation of the latter.

The tragedy undoubtedly left its mark upon Aidan and shortened his life. For within twelve days, whilst staying at the royal country seat close to Bamborough, he was seized so suddenly with illness that it was impossible to remove him even to his room. He was placed against a wooden buttress outside the church and an awning placed over him. "In this position, significant of his habitual detachment from worldly interests, he breathed his last on August 31, 651. The little village which now represents the 'burgh of Queen Bebb' is less really ennobled by its grand castle, and its associations with Northumbrian royalty, and with a modern prince bishop's munificence, than by the fact that in visiting its interesting church we stand upon the ground where Aidan died."<sup>2</sup>

Such, then, was Aidan, a man who may rightly claim the apostleship of Northumbria. In the words of the old historian: "As a true historian, I have described simply such things as were done concerning or by him, and I praise those actions of his which are worthy of praise, and commit them to remembrance for the benefit of my readers; to wit, his zeal for peace and charity, for continence and humility; his spirit, master of anger and avarice, contemner of pride and vain-glory; his diligence in both practising and teaching the Divine commands; his habit of reading and watching; the weight of his authority in rebuking the rich and powerful, and likewise his tenderness in comforting the afflicted, strengthening the weak, relieving and defending the poor." And shall we not add with Bede: "These things in him I much admire and love, since I doubt not they were pleasing to God"<sup>3</sup>

F. B. AMBROSE WILLIAMS.

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<sup>1</sup> Bede, "Hist. Eccl.," iii. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Bright, "Early Eng. Ch. Hist.," p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> Bede, "Hist. Eccl.," iii. 17.

