

(3s) SAINT CUTHBERT

(SEPTEMBER 4TH, 2020)

Suggested Readings: *2 Corinthians 6: 1 – 10; Psalm 23; Matthew 18: 12 – 14.*

Cuthbert was the fifth bishop of Lindisfarne after Saint Aidan, whose feast was earlier this week. He was born, possibly into a well-to-do family, about AD 634, the year in which Oswald began to reign in Northumbria. In his late teens he was guarding sheep at night and had a vision of angels carrying a bright soul to heaven. The following morning he learnt that Bishop Aidan of Lindisfarne had died the previous day (31st August 651). This seems to have been the final push, leading him to give up his secular life and ask for admission to the monastery of Melrose. He arrived on horseback and carrying a spear – perhaps suggesting that he had served as a soldier – but, as the abbot was away, had to wait outside until his return. Cuthbert was soon recognised as an outstanding monk, and after ten years became prior, first of Melrose, and then of Lindisfarne, under the bishop-abbot. During this time he went on long missionary tours, but also spent time as a hermit on the small ‘Saint Cuthbert’s Isle’ off the coast of Lindisfarne.

After fifteen years he gave up the office of prior, and retired to the Inner Farne Island, where Aidan used to spend Lent. Here Cuthbert lived as a hermit for nine years. Many people came to him there, asking for advice and healing, and his reputation for holiness and wisdom spread through Northumbria and beyond.

In AD 684 Theodore, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the king of Northumbria agreed to nominate Cuthbert as a bishop, but it took a personal visit from the king to persuade him to leave his hermitage and return to Lindisfarne. He served as bishop for only two years, but in that time he travelled all over the diocese, preaching and teaching, dedicating churches, ordaining priests, and showing great pastoral care for the sick, the bereaved and the poor. He spent Christmas 686 with the monks on Lindisfarne and then returned to the Inner Farne, where he died on 20th March 687. So deeply was he honoured that, when the Vikings attacked Lindisfarne in 875, the monks took his body with them on a journey which only ended when it was translated to a shrine in the newly-built Cathedral of Durham. It is almost certain that his body, with the head of S. Oswald, still lies behind the high altar of the cathedral. Today (the day of ‘translation’), is observed as his Feast, because the anniversary of his death always falls in Lent.