

News : 17th November - The first female Bishop is dead!

"a woman of great energy, who was a skilled administrator and teacher" Bede

Who was that? I don't remember hearing on the news that anyone has been appointed. That is so sad, women have only just been given the opportunity to become bishops and this happens.

I am not talking about a recent bishop or a recent death I am talking about someone who died 1334 years ago in 680AD.

We think that females having a major role in society is a relatively modern notion. A hundred years ago women belonged to their fathers or their husbands. Women were paid less than men and traditional female jobs were seen with less standing than male jobs. What we sometimes forget is that females have been out there doing their bit and have done the traditional male jobs.

A bit of background

In the 7th Century there was a lady called Hilda, she was born in 614. Her great Uncle was Edwin of Northumbria and he was a King and also a Saint. Hilda had a rough start in life, her father was poisoned when she was an infant and so Hilda was brought up in Edwin's court. Edwin had converted to Christianity and his whole court converted too. On Easter Day in 627 the whole court was baptised along with a 13 year old Hilda. It was in a wooden church near the site of the present York Minster.

The Queen, Ethelburgha was a devoted Catholic and it is thought that she had influenced Edwin in his conversion to Christianity. She founded a convent in Kent and took Hilda with her. At the age of 33 she answered the call of the Bishop of Lindisfarne, and so she returned to Northumbria to live as a Nun.

She was appointed the second Abbess of Hartlepool and later founded the Abbey in Whitby for which she is most associated. This was an abbey for both males and females, they lived separately but they came together for worship. Hilda ran a strict ship, strongly upholding the Christian values of peace and charity.

What made Hilda so special?

Hilda was singled out by the Bishop to go to Lindisfarne. He must have had her good things about her. Bede described her as a woman of energy and a skilled administrator and teacher. She also had devotion and grace. She gained a reputation which meant that

Kings and Princes came to her for advice. She cared about ordinary people too, Caedmon was a herder at the monastery and he was inspired in a dream to sing praises to God. She recognised his gifts and encouraged him to develop them.

The Synod of Whitby

Hilda's Abbey was chosen for the synod. (A gathering from far and wide of the decision makers within the church). It was the first synod in the Kingdom of King Oswiu. Up until this point there were two different calculations for working out when Easter was. It was decided at this synod to accept the Roman calculation. The Monks were not happy and retreated back up the coast to Lindisfarne and they continued to use the Celtic calculation. Eventually these Monks retreated to Iona and then back to Ireland. The legacy of the Roman calculation remains with us still in the 21st century.

At the age of 66 Hilda died on 17th November 680 AD. She in effect was the first female Bishop. St Hilda's Day falls about the same time as the International day of tolerance. Hilda was not just tolerated for being female, her views were accepted and sought after. She was seen for who she was as a person and not disregarded for being female. Tolerance is essential for us all living in today's society. Women are treated much more fairly but there are still groups of people who aren't treated fairly. We need toleration of culture, toleration of faith and toleration of sexuality.

This week is a good week to think about accepting people, seeing the good in them and treating people as we would like to be treated ourselves. Hilda was given a chance all those centuries ago, what gifts are we losing out on if we don't tolerate people and give them a chance in life today?

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