

St. Bede the Venerable: Longing for Heaven

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The 7th and 8th centuries of Anglo-Saxon England was a period of great danger, and unrest. In the northeastern corner of England, the region called Northumbria was the home of many holy men and women who helped spread the Gospel of Christ in thought, word, and deed. Known as the Northern Saints of the British Isles, these courageous and spirited holy men and women established monasteries, instituted great libraries, converted royalty and peasants, inspired the arts, healed and counseled the afflicted, and settled political and theological disputes throughout the land. Among these was an unassuming monk and priest who became the visionary scholar and brilliant teacher, St. Bede the Venerable.

St. Bede was born in Northumbria near the monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow in 673 and died there in 735. During his lifetime, he barely ventured beyond the geographical limits of his home region. Now, almost 1500 years later, St. Bede remains the only Englishman ever to be named a Doctor of the Universal Church. It is not too farfetched to say that the entire fabric of ecclesiastical experience as we know it has been shaped and inspired by St. Bede's thoughtful scholarship, his mighty intellectual vision, and his prayerful devotion to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

St. Bede's great delight was the joy of study, learning and teaching. As a young monk, he was tutored by another prominent monastic figure of Northumbria, St. Benedict Biscop. Of noble lineage, Benedict Biscop established the monastery of St. Peter at the mouth of the River Wear on the northeastern coastline of England. The abbey church that he designed and erected was constructed by stonemasons and other craftsmen invited to Britain from France. These artisans arrayed the monastery with sacred vessels, lamps and other creative works, including the newest art form— windows filled with glass. Benedict's next building project was the monastery at Jarrow on the bank of the River Tyne, just south of Wearmouth. Here the abbot began to compile a vast library of secular and religious volumes from Rome and other parts of Europe. This was the nurturing atmosphere of art, architecture, spirituality, and learning that surrounded the fertile mind and spirit of the young monk Bede and provided him a haven to worship, grow, reflect, and flourish.

As a young monk, St. Bede studied Latin and later Greek. His later writings indicate his advanced training and knowledge in sacred as well as secular literature. It is clear from these that he knew the Rule of St. Benedict, although RSB was one of seventeen rules which the abbot drew upon to shape the life of his monks. The Rule of St. Benedict may likely have represented for St. Bede what it symbolizes for contemporary oblates today -- a source of wisdom and inspiration that points the way to a prayerful and balanced life.

St. Bede is revered today for his epic work *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which in five books traces the development of the church in Britain and celebrates its holy men and women. Today, this monumental effort is studied and admired for the accuracy of its historical method as well as for its hagiography, and remains the greatest source of information available about the early history of the English overall. Several of the northern saints whose lives

are recorded there are shining examples of early Celtic Christianity: St. Cuthbert, St. Hilda, St. Aidan of Iona, and the mystic cowherd turned poet Caedmon, who transposed scripture into moving works of music, song, and rhyme.

Although *The Ecclesiastical History* was the final and primary opus of St. Bede's life, this monastic educator contributed many other learned works. Less well known are his biblical commentaries, thoughtful treatises addressed primarily for his fellow monks and intended for prayerful reflection in the tradition of *Lectio Divina*. The scholarly monk also penned independent accounts of the lives of St. Cuthbert, St. Anastasius, and St. Felix.

In his theological, historical, and hagiographical studies, Bede was gifted by great freedom of mind and accomplished, intellectual insight. He also applied his mental acuity to questions of mathematics which thereby enabled the early church to compile an accurate ecclesiastical calendar for Easter. Bede calculated the system of dating that placed Christ at the center of time's reference point in the notations known as A.D. and B.C. This illuminating concept was visionary for his day and remains equally remarkable when considered in relation to our modern worldview. In the physical sciences, Bede also actively speculated on the notion of the earth as a global sphere.

In traditional monastic fashion, St. Bede always considered the Word of God to be a vehicle of prayer and inner life conversion. Those who knew him characterized him as a man of simplicity, peacefulness, and thankfulness. His lifelong desire to draw ever closer to God was an incentive that propelled his love of learning, writing, and teaching. He studied to learn, learned to absorb, and then directed his mind to share the insights of his intellect and devotion with others. In both a religious and wider sense, St. Bede became an enduring source of inspiration because his life work remains always an outer expression of this inner faith.

The example of The Venerable Bede reaches out and touches us today. His was the life of a true monk who longed for heaven, a gifted scholar who used the implements of his talent to serve the Gospel, and above all a holy person whose life reflected the loving presence of God here on earth.

Bibliography

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