

Reflection Thursday Week 27b St Wilfrid 2023

St Wilfrid was born in Northumbria in 634. He was educated in the monastery of Lindisfarne. Later he travelled to Rome with Benet Biscop, spending a considerable time at Lyons on the way. This wider, continental experience had a profound effect upon him, and, on his return, he keenly supported the Roman traditions as against the prevailing 'Celtic' customs introduced by the Irish missionaries from Iona under St Aidan. Shortly afterwards he was appointed Abbot of Ripon, and sometime later was ordained priest.

After the death of Aidan, the Roman and the Celtic traditions entered a bitter dispute. In 664 a Synod was held in Whitby, in the monastery of St Hilda, to settle the question and Wilfrid took a leading part in the debate, successfully arguing for the abolition of the Celtic traditions and the imposition of the church discipline of Rome.

Within twelve months he was appointed Bishop of Lindisfarne. He chose to be consecrated in Paris and was absent in France for so long that St Chad, one of Aidan's pupils, was consecrated bishop in his place. Wilfrid had to appeal to St Theodore of Canterbury, his metropolitan, before he was able to take possession of his diocese. He established himself at York, but encountered much hostility being opposed at various times not only by some of the secular rulers of his day but even by men of great sanctity like St John of Beverley. A particular dispute arose in 678 when Theodore attempted to divide the large, unwieldy diocese of Lindisfarne/York into two parts. Wilfrid objected and appealed to Rome. He was successful and became the first Englishman to take a lawsuit to the Roman courts.

His return to Northumberland was much less successful. For a while he was imprisoned by the King of Northumbria but eventually escaped to Sussex. Due to his courage and dedication, he used this time to mission to the South Saxons and the people of Friesland, so beginning the great English mission to the Germanic people that was continued by his pupil, St Willibrord.

Wilfrid returned to Northumbria in 686 but was not allowed to remain long in the area. After an appeal to Rome, he accepted a compromise by becoming Bishop of Hexham while retaining his monastery at Ripon. There he introduced many additional Roman customs and reorganised the monastery under the rule of St Benedict. He died in 709.