

Aidan of Northumbria

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Date: 31 May 2020

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[0 : 0 0] I was wandering through its library and stumbled across an old book with an obscure title, Aidan of North Umbria. I had a few minutes to spare, so I took the book off its shelf and read it from cover to cover.

Admittedly, it was only 100 pages long or so, and you know how quickly I read. I was totally absorbed in the life of this man, Aidan, who lived nearly 1,500 years ago.

The next day, our second son was born, and when Kathmer and I talked about what we would call him, the answer was obvious. Aidan.

The Aidan I had read of in the book was a Celtic missionary to Northumberland, northeast England. And our prayer was that our Aidan, newly born, would grow up to be a faithful Christian, zealous for sharing the gospel with others.

Our Aidan was born on the 29th of November, 2001, but no one knows when Aidan of North Umbria was born. We know he died in AD 651, but the exact date and place of his birth is unknown.

[1 : 1 9] He was most definitely from Ireland, probably from the Connaught region. And at a young age, he traveled to the Celtic monastery in Iona, a small island off the coast of Mull, to be taught by the monks there.

The monastery had been founded sometime previous by St. Columba. Now, a number of years ago, we began to explore some of the dangerous ideas of the early church, where we discovered and established how it is that we as Christians today in 2020 Glasgow believe what we do, that God is one and God is three.

How Jesus and the Holy Spirit are both divine. And we discovered finally from the life and work of St. Augustine, how we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Well, St. Augustine died in AD 430 by the shores of the Mediterranean. 1,500 miles north of where he came from in Carthage, in Britannia, the Roman legions were making ready to leave.

And they did so in 442 AD. Many of these Roman legionaries were Christians, and so they left a very loose Christian legacy on our island.

[2 : 4 4] And yet the Catholic Church, if we may call it that, had not yet established itself in Great Britain. Most of the British tribes, if not all of them, were still pagan and worshipped gods of stone and wood and sky.

The greatest missionary effort in these early years, after the Roman legions left, was made by what is called today the Celtic Church, epitomized by men like Columba of Iona, Kentigern of Glasgow, Melrua of Wester Ross, and Aden of Northumberland.

Recently, there has been a great resurgence of interest in Celtic Christianity, with everyone from Presbyterians to Baptists, from Liberals to Charismatics, claiming Celtic Christianity as their own.

The truth is that Celtic Christianity belongs to no one but the Celts, and they're all now in heaven. Screeds of garbage have been written about Celtic Christianity, and less than 0.1% of it should be believed.

But we cannot discount it if we want to understand the progress of the gospel in the British Isles. Because it was, in its inception, a missionary church the likes of which Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and England had never seen before, and have never seen since.

[4 : 19] So, the best example of Celtic Christianity at work, for that example, I'd chosen Aden of Northumbria with this dangerous idea of mission for Christ, of spreading the good news of Jesus and his gospel in a pagan society.

But if the gospel's good enough to be believed, it's good enough to be shared. Okay, back to Aden. Having arrived in Iona, he devoted himself to the study of Scripture and to prayer.

Some time later, a boy arrived at the monastery in Iona seeking shelter. His name was Oswald, and he was from the kingdom of Northumbria. Aden became his mentor, and Oswald grew in the faith.

Now, Oswald wasn't just anyone. He was next in line to the throne of Northumbria, and having left the monastery sometime later, became its king.

But Oswald ruled over a pagan region and a pagan group of tribes. He vowed to Christianize them. And so he sent to Iona for a Celtic monk to evangelize his people.

[5 : 34] The first monk Iona sent returned soon after, complaining that the people of Northumbria were stubborn and wouldn't listen to the gospel he was preaching. When he heard this, Aden stood up a young man among the other monks of Iona and volunteered himself to be the next to be sent to Oswald.

And so he went. And soon after, he established his own monastic community on the island of Lindisfarne. From there, Aden and his fellow Celtic monks evangelized the whole of Northumbria and beyond.

He led many thousands of people to faith in Jesus and he left a legacy of godly piety and missionary zeal the likes of which we have not seen since.

A quick word about Celtic monks. Roman Catholic monks shaved the top of their heads and had tonsures. Celtic monks shaved the front of their heads and so to all the world they looked like they had exceptionally receding hairlines.

They wore very simple clothes. They tended to walk everywhere rather than ride horses. They were Celts. So in all likelihood, Aden's English would have been very poor.

[7 : 01] More on this later, his first language was probably a variant of Irish and Scots Gaelic. Their favorite mode of travel was the coracle, a skin-covered boat.

So here we have Aden of Northumbria, more accurately, Aden of Lindisfarne, who has been called by one of the most eminent Anglican historians, the Apostle of England.

Imagine that. The Apostle of England came from Scotland. Well, perhaps the most dangerous idea the Celtic church ever had was that the gospel was not just good enough to be believed and to be lived, but good enough to be shared with the world around them.

With English, with Irish, with Scots, with Welsh. Yes, one of them called Columbanus by name. He even became a missionary to Italy.

So when we think of the great figures of the Celtic church, we are to think of the dangerous idea that the gospel of Jesus Christ is to be proclaimed to a pagan society, a society ours is increasingly mirroring.

[8 : 20] Now, when I thought about it, given that Celtic monks often used to travel by coracle to reach the people God had sent them to share the gospel with, I recalled how in Mark 1, 14-20, Jesus, the greatest of all missionaries, called men of the sea to follow him and to become fishers of men.

He introduced them to the most dangerous idea in the world, that of both living as his disciple and of discipling the nations for him.

Of the four men he called by the Sea of Galilee that day, three would die as martyrs for him, and the other John would live a life of persecution. It seems to me that in the pattern of events here in Mark 1, verses 14-20, illustrated through the life of Aidan of Lindisfarne, we have an inspiration.

Who of you is bold enough to walk in their footsteps? Who among us has the courage of mind and heart to follow them?

as they followed Christ. And so, as we think through these verses and we see them working in the life of Aidan, we want to see two things.

[9 : 38] First of all, Aidan followed Jesus, and secondly, Aidan fished for Jesus. The challenge for all of us this evening is to imitate Aidan as he imitated Christ.

And my prayer for all of us is the same prayer I pray for my own Aidan, that we will all earnestly follow Jesus and zealously fish for Jesus.

First of all then, Aidan followed Jesus. Aidan followed Jesus. Well, look at our passage. Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him.

Calls them to a life of discipleship, of learning from him and of him. His fundamental call to them was not to fish for the souls of men, but to follow him.

And in so doing, Jesus lays down a basic principle for us all, that following Jesus comes before fishing for Jesus, that knowing Jesus comes before serving Jesus, that being a disciple of Jesus comes before making other disciples for Jesus.

[10 : 54] One of the things I've noticed over the years is that minister's conferences tend to fixate on fishing for Jesus, serving Jesus, and making disciples for Jesus, rather than on ourselves following Jesus, knowing Jesus, and being a disciple of Jesus.

One of the things we're going to learn in this session of Dangerous Ideas is that those figures from church history we are going to study were first and foremost godly people.

They themselves were followers of Jesus. They were knowers of Jesus. They were disciples of Jesus. God to show you, does it not, that at the end of the day, Jesus isn't nearly as interested in what we are for him in public as in who we are with him in private, in our piety, not in our preaching.

And Aidan of Lindisfarne was, according to historians, a very godly man. Let me expand on that in three ways. His prayer, his reading, and his fasting.

His prayer, reading, and fasting. Prayer, first of all, prayer. Aidan of Lindisfarne, for all that he was the greatest evangelist of his generation, was first and foremost a man of prayer.

[12 : 32] To him, prayer was more vital than preaching, and knowing Jesus more vital than making Jesus known. Here, then, is the secret of Aidan's excellence.

Not that he achieved as much as St. Columba did in Scotland or St. Patrick in Ireland, but that he really knew Jesus. It's astonishing that though he lived 1,500 years ago, we still possess some of Aidan's prayers.

Here's one that I found what strikes me as preserving the priority of knowing Christ over serving Christ. Aidan prayed these words, Leave me alone with God as much as may be.

As the tide draws the waters close in upon the shore, make me an island set apart alone with you, God, holy to you.

Then, with the turning of the tide, prepare me to carry your presence to the busy world beyond, the world that rushes in on me till the waters come again and fold me back to you.

[13 : 51] One of the advantages, I suppose, of living in a Celtic monastic community was that it gave you time to spend alone with God. and yet Aidan went further.

There was a small rock off Lindisfarne which he would sail to in his coracle to spend time alone with God. Peter, Andrew, James, and John, they spent three years with Jesus.

The Jesus who, according to the gospel writers, got up before everyone else in the morning to spend time in prayer prayer, and often spent whole nights in prayer. They watched their master pray and they discovered that the secret of the spiritual power was here in spiritual piety and prayer.

After Jesus' death, it was no surprise that the disciples or the apostles, as they were called then, decided that the early church was best served practically by deacons, that they themselves would imitate their master, Jesus, by prayer.

Aidan prayed. Aidan, secondly, read, reading. We tend to think of everyone who was before us as being primitive compared to us.

[15 : 13] Far be it. Aidan lived in the seventh century, but he was as well read as the best of us. It's just that he was the student of mainly one book, the Bible.

Now, you will know that Celtic monks took the word of God very seriously indeed. You'll be familiar with the book of Kels, the Celtic version of the Gospels, and its amazing, intricate artwork.

But Aidan, more than anyone else, was personally addicted to a diet of the Bible. In particular, he loved the Psalms.

He wrote them out on strips of vellum parchment, but only because he had first written them out on the vellum of his heart. During his travels, mainly by foot, he would recite the Psalms, often speaking them out loud.

Here's a man who's devoted not just to seeking God's face in private prayer, but in hearing God's voice in personal reading. That, of course, is the second leg upon which the stool of the apostles stood.

[16 : 31] We will give ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. This is part and parcel of the discipleship to which Jesus calls Peter, James, Andrew, and John.

Peter, but they'll become eager students and practitioners of his word. Peter and John themselves wrote inspired books of the Bible, but only because, first and foremost, they were students of the word.

When Peter preaches in Acts, you can tell that he understands the flow of the Old Testament and how it all points to Jesus. If we would be missionaries for Christ in our homes and our workplaces and our schools and our universities, we must devote ourselves first to the reading of the word.

And then thirdly, fasting. Fasting. Interesting. Phil and myself were talking about this when we went for our socially distanced walk on Thursday. Fasting. It's a subject which has fallen out of discussion in the modern church, no doubt, because fasting's difficult for those of us who constantly eat and for whom even missing a snack is seen as a hardship.

Fasting was very much part and parcel of Aidan's life. Whenever he'd take that small coracle over to that rock to pray, he would deny himself food for that day.

[18 : 02] To deny himself physical bread made his soul hunger for the Jesus who said, I am the bread of life. You come to me shall never hunger. Fasting and self-denial.

Yes, I guess we could probably say of Aidan as we could say of many of the Celtic saints that they were ascetics who in order to indulge their delight in Christ denied themselves the good things of this world.

because ultimately, ultimately, the call to discipleship is a call to self-denial. The four disciples Jesus called in Mark 1 heard Jesus say, when you fast, and they watched Jesus himself fasting and in effect saying to his heavenly father, you know, I need you more than I need my food.

Many of us tried fasting as a spiritual discipline. That fasting which is a denial of an earthly thing in order that we may enjoy a heavenly thing.

Fasting may consist merely in devoting the time we have spent doing something else to prayer. I think we'd be shocked if we could see how much time in the day we give over to social media.

[19 : 29] How would you cope with a Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat fast? Where you spend the 15 minutes or so 10 times a day you'd have spent flicking on your phone now spending it in prayer.

prayer. I think we get the point. Before we are anything in public we must first be with Christ in private. That as far as I'm concerned was Aidan's great strength his private devotional life and it's what made him truly great.

Aidan followed Jesus but then secondly Aidan fished for Jesus. Aidan fished for Jesus. I've always loved that to which Jesus called these four disciples to fish for men.

Perhaps it was because I was brought up in a fishing community but it's an image to which I can readily relate. These four men Peter, James, John and Andrew were to go from mending nets to using nets.

from fishing for fish to fishing for men to evangelism and heralding the good news of Jesus. But if the gospel is good enough to be believed then it's good enough to be shared.

[20 : 56] Perhaps the most radical and dangerous thing you can do as a Christian this evening is to pick up the phone and tell another person about Jesus. That was the dangerous idea of the Celtic church epitomized by Aidan of Lindisfarne.

That the gospel could and should be preached among pagans and that by the Holy Spirit of Christ a nation could be turned. How we need that dangerous idea today as we witness the seeming death of Christian culture in Scotland.

As we close this evening let me suggest to you the four areas in which Aidan fished for the souls of men and even though he spent a substantial period of time in his own monastic community on that island of Lindisfarne he managed to change the whole of England.

Aidan engaged in making disciples, in building teams, in living sacrificially and in preaching the gospel. Aidan engaged first of all in making disciples.

You'll notice that Jesus called these four disciples to be disciple making disciples. Christians who by telling others about Jesus Christ would make more Christians.

[22 : 24] Three years after the events detailed in Mark 1, Jesus would say to them, go and make disciples of all nations. And by saying that Jesus is saying Christianity is evangelistic or it's not Christianity at all.

One of the first things that Aidan of Northumberland did when he arrived in Lindisfarne was to create a monastic settlement which became a center of learning and discipleship.

At any time Aidan personally disciplined 12 younger men in the Christian faith who having been disciplined personally by Aidan would then each go and disciple 12 other young men for Christ.

But you ask, well where did these young men come from that Aidan disciplined? The answer was from two sources. The first were sons of prominent Christians in Northumbria.

The second were young men he had bought. Yes, he had bought them. They'd been slaves. And with whatever money Aidan was given, he would buy their freedom, take them to Lindisfarne to learn at his feet.

[23 : 40] Two of them, having been disciplined by Aidan, became Celtic missionaries to southern England with one particularly involved in the evangelism of Kent.

The point is that a church that does not intentionally focus on making disciples for Jesus is not an evangelistic church.

Secondly, Aidan engaged in building teams. Teams. I want to draw you back to a point I made early on. Aidan was a Celt.

He was from Connaught in Ireland and spent most of his life on the west coast of Scotland. He spoke Gaelic and for the majority of his life, according to historians, his English was really quite poor.

How can you evangelize the people of Northumbria when you can't speak their language? Do you say to them that if they want to learn Christianity they have to first learn Gaelic?

[24 : 44] Or do you make the gospel as accessible to them as you possibly can? Well, not everyone finds learning new language as easy, but Aidan's way around it was to have a translator with them whenever he would preach.

He would preach in Gaelic and his translator would render it into English for the people. In the early years of his ministry in Northumbria, his translator was often King Oswald himself, his young friend.

Any missionary strategy worth its salt is focused on building teams. Or as one of our church planters likes to say, teamwork makes the dream work.

As you study the lives of the apostles you realize that they built teams around themselves to help them in the proclamation of the gospel. They used letter writers and others to get the letters they had written to their destinations.

They gave team members important assignments like ordaining elders in Crete and dealing with the moral behavior in Corinth.

[25 : 58] Many of our greatest evangelists aren't particularly good team players and that's a pity because great movements like the Celtic mission to England are really only effective through teams of people who each contribute their own unique gift to the mission.

Thirdly, Aidan engaged in living sacrificially. Aidan engaged in living sacrificially. Aidan was a man who preached a very big Christ and a very generous gospel to the pagans among whom he lived.

But he first preached it because he practiced it. he was known for his godliness and his self-sacrifice. He was a very simple man and he loved nothing more than to walk from one village to another village to share the good news of Jesus.

On one occasion, his friend King Oswald gave him a superb horse on which to ride. In our world, it would have been like being given your own personal Ferrari to get you from Brora to Golspey or from Glasgow to Edinburgh.

Aidan was very uncomfortable with his gift of the horse. The next day, he took the horse with him as he walked to a certain village where he happened upon a beggar at the side of the road.

[27 : 24] Without a second thought, Aidan gave that beggar his horse and he walked away in foot. In today's money, the horse was worth hundreds of thousands of pounds, but without a thought, Aidan gave it to someone in genuine need.

He himself lived sacrificially and frugally among the people, being a living example of the gospel he himself was preaching. Ah, now here is where the rubber hits the road for us as a church.

Recently, the church leadership has been working to revamp our website, and we've done some pretty good work. Well, we haven't. Heather and Laura have done all the great work. so we're looking at other church websites, both within our denomination and beyond.

And you know, it's quite sobering. When you move from one website to another website, all you can see, all you can see are middle-class, young, white couples with 2.4 children.

Look, see, this is who comes to our church, says the website. You're welcome to come if you are middle class, young, white, and have 2.4 children.

[28 : 46] Aidan would not go to a church like that, because he was always more interested on those on the margins, those who are genuine need. In fact, Aidan's attitude to the church more closely mirrored that of Paul and James, and more definitely not today's church websites.

And then fourthly, and finally, Aidan engaged in preaching the gospel. He engaged in preaching the gospel. As we close, very briefly, I want us to see that at the very heart of Aidan's missionary efforts was his preaching of the gospel.

Listen to how one of his contemporaries described his preaching, one of the people who heard him preaching. Aidan set before his hearers the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the expulsion of our first parents from paradise, adding many exhortations to seek a heavenly inheritance.

Passing on to the mysteries of the Old Testament, he came to the joyful tidings of the mercy of Christ, his language rising in sublimity as he felt the greatness of esteem.

As he then discanted on the miracles of the gospels and the mysteries of the passion and resurrection, his growing eloquence overcame his hearers. His hearers burst into tears, and an eager longing for heaven filled their hearts.

[30 : 19] Remember, Aidan is evangelizing pagan Northumbria, and what was his primary tool for that evangelism?

It was the preaching of the gospel. There is a growing group among evangelicalism, and yes, even among reformed evangelicalism, who believe that preaching the gospel to pagan Scotland today does not work, and it's the wrong strategy.

Maybe they should ask Aidan about that. The apostles, before they were anything else, were preachers, with Peter, Paul, and John, magisteriously proclaiming Jesus as Lord, and the gospel as good news to the world.

Today, more than ever, we need the preaching of the word. Aidan was what he was as a preacher, because in private, he was dependent on God's grace.

Let's pray for a new generation of Aedans among us. There may be even one or two of us here on the Zoom call tonight, of godly, zealous missionaries for the truth of Jesus Christ in this needy, pagan, mixed-up society of ours.

[31 : 54] We're going to sing now the second section of Psalm 84, from verse 8 to verse 12. The tune is Ottawa.

Ottawa. Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty, and receive the plea I make. Listen to me, God of Jacob. Hear me for your mercy's sake.

We're going to WE'RE ENOUGH TO ad poem through 20 God of Times To adoit