

Aiden and Hilda

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[0 : 00] Well, bless you. It's great to be back here. And it feels like a long time since I offered you part one.

! If any of you do remember a little bit about Aidan and a first bit about Hilda. And it's a privilege to come back and refresh and renew that thinking.

I want to begin by reminding you of a couple of passages of Scripture. And those are, and if you've got a Bible, you may want to turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 1.

1 Corinthians chapter 1.

I want to be out of my depth in your love. Do you really? Do you really want to be out of your depth?

[1 : 26] We want to be in the love of God, don't we? But I'm not so sure we always want to be out of our depth. That's a bit of a scary place.

It's a beautiful place. It's a wonderful place. It's a blessed place. But it's a bit of a scary place. And if you remember the words that go on in that song about letting go the stuff that we've held tightly.

My, that's a bit subversive too. Do we really want to do that? Well, have a listen to some Scripture too, because we hear both the resounding yes of God and of the gospel of God.

And we hear what it's really like to live life. 2 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 18.

But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not yes and no. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not yes and no.

[2 : 45] But in him it has always been yes. For no matter how many promises God has made, they are yes in Christ.

And so through him the Amen is spoken by us to the glory of God. What a wonderful, resounding proclamation of the gospel.

And it's absolutely true. Let me take you back a few verses. To verse 8.

Which might as well begin, however. It doesn't. But I'll put my own, however. We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia.

We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.

[3 : 59] Indeed, in our hearts, we felt the sentence of death. That doesn't quite go with all the yes and amens, does it?

And yet, both are absolutely true. The human experience of suffering, of trial, of tribulation, of persecution, is absolutely there and it's real.

And the yes and the amen of God in Christ are also there and absolutely real.

And in the second half of verse 9 we read, but this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God, who even raises the dead.

So there's something in which it doesn't matter if you're killed in the process. Because God will raise you anyway. That's pretty cool, I reckon.

[5 : 13] But I'm not sure that the dying is very nice. And so I want to take you on just over the page into chapter 4. Because the theme continues.

Therefore, says Paul, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. And we go on to verse 4.

We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

For God, who said, Let light shine out of darkness, has made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Yes. This is the gospel. This is the glory. But, says Paul, but we have this treasure in jars of clay.

[6 : 30] Oh dear. We are jars of clay. In order to show that the all-surpassing power comes from God, not from us.

Nothing to brag about. The more cracked the old jar is, the more of the glorious light of the gospel manages to get out.

We are hard pressed on every side, says the apostle, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not in despair. Persecuted, but not abandoned.

Struck down, but not destroyed. These are the tensions of Christian life and ministry.

Friends, you can't have Christian life and ministry without those tensions. The wonderful glory of the gospel of God on the one hand, and the human weakness, and the darkness of the surrounding world on the other.

[7 : 45] Now, this is the world of Whitby in 2015. This is the world of Whitby in 657, when our dear Hilda turned up here.

I don't think it's a mistake that I'm here on Halloween. I'm here on Goth weekend, or the end of Goth week.

Halloween, all hallows, all saints, the seasons when we remember the dead, and when we celebrate the saints.

The whole season is kind of summed up here, in this place on this very weekend. And the scene is such a mixture. Some of it's a bit dark, a bit creepy, a bit sinister.

Quite a lot of it is full of fun, and creativity, and dressing up, and drinking, and it's not all bad out there.

[9 : 11] As we came down the road to the church, we saw a very grey-haired, middle-aged couple come out of a house in the most splendid Victorian costume.

He'd got his topper, and she was in this wonderful, kind of dark green velvet dress. And I thought, you know, what a fantastic occasion to dress up this really is.

People come from all over the world to Whitby this weekend to dress up. It's not all spooky. Some of it, sadly, is.

But what is true is what Paul said in this passage, that the God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers.

But what an opportunity for us to live out the life and love and light of the gospel. What an opportunity it is to demonstrate the fun and creativity and community that Jesus brings to us.

[10 : 20] who have been redeemed. And it was such a multifaceted, post-Christian, neo-pagan culture that Hilda arrived in in the middle of the 7th century.

She came to your headland here, the Bay of the Beacon, as it was then known. And Bede tells us that she came to found and organize the monastic community here.

Now, Hilda was a very interesting person, and we know a little bit about her pedigree.

she had an older sister, Herewith, and they were the two daughters of Hereric and Brighuswith.

Now, you won't remember all those names, but a real young woman from a real family with quite an aristocratic pedigree.

[11 : 34] Her, she was great niece of King Edwin and came from that line through Hereric that went back to Aila, who was the first Saxon king of the land of Deara, which was actually the land south of here down to the Humber.

That was the first Saxon kingdom. So, we have a very interesting woman. We have a woman whose name means struggle.

Hilda could have written that stuff that Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, but she was tough and the life that she grew up in was tough.

She was a battler. She was a woman of courage and perseverance. Her father was murdered just before she was born.

Her mother brought up the two girls in a very difficult situation. A male dominated militaristic warlike culture where they were under very serious threat.

[13 : 07] They found refuge in Edwin's court in York and she grew up for a little while in some relative security in that place and at the age of 13 was baptized with King Edwin.

Interestingly, in the Roman background and culture of the mission of Paulinus in York. long after that Edwin is killed in battle and his adult sons and Hilda have to flee for their lives again.

We know very little about the next 20 years of Hilda's life. I suspect a lot of it was moving from place to place from safety to hopefully another safety running from one threat and to another.

Now after that well what did go on? I suspect nobody's very sure here whether she resisted marriage and devoted herself to charitable work or perhaps more likely that she was married and

then widowed.

Certainly it's very unlikely a young princess would get away with not being married in those days. But what we do know is that in her early thirties she decided to choose a life of particular dedication to God within a monastic context.

[14:57] And that of course was very normal for the widows of royalty. It was the only safe place to go was to actually head for a monastery.

And her sister has already gone to a monastery in France at Chelle near Paris and she makes her way down into East Anglia to go and join her sister.

And it's at that moment that Aidan intervenes in her life. He hears that she's heading off and he sends a message to her to beg her to stay, to beg her to establish prayerful monastic community in this country among the English speaking people.

people. And so she turns around and comes back and we know that she joined a small group of women on a tiny plot of land on the north bank of the river Weir.

And she was there for a year or so and was then called by Aidan to become the second abbess of the monastic community at Hartlepool.

[16:19] And then some years later some time after Aidan's death a gift of land is offered to her by King Oswee and she goes down the coast from Hartlepool and finds this neck of land out here this beacon on the headland at Whitby and begins to establish the community she's a remarkable woman because she clearly became a very loved figure Bede records that she was affectionately known as mother he records that she led the people in the ways of quiet devotion and deep knowledge of the scriptures he tells us that many many people became priests within her community and six famous bishops emerged from this monastery over the years while

Hilda was there it was an extraordinary place a large flourishing double monastery of men and women and women here today and men I want you to hear this the double monasteries of the early dark ages were all led by women have you heard that they were all led by women you see these people didn't have a hang up about male and female in the way that the Roman part of the world inherited they just chose the best people around whoever they were whether they were priests whether they were abbots whether they were tribal leaders whether they were men whether they were women they got chosen let me tell you something that's going on in the church of England at the moment there's a whole series of very high quality women becoming bishops see they've been held down for so long and I was chatting to somebody who was involved in one of the appointment panels of a recent bishop and I won't name the one but what was fascinating this guy said to me said we had a whole series of candidates and out of the six best candidates five of them were women and it was an absolute no brainer to appoint the best person who was a woman hallelujah we finally beginning to catch up but it's taken nearly 1400 years this tough wise woman had to deal with some rather opinionated and ambitious men one of whom was Bishop Wilfred and I suspect he was a pain in the proverbial I could preach another sermon about him but I won't but with grace and wisdom Hilda picked her way through a whole series of very difficult circumstances in very difficult times Whitby is famous for the synod of Whitby that took place in 664 that Hilda presided over Hilda gave that safe context of a woman who herself had been converted under the Roman mission but had come to love the way of the Celts who had been deeply influenced by Aidan and others of that Irish Celtic background she had the wisdom and the grace to hold together the two traditions not to leap one way or the other

I do believe that Whitby was chosen and Hilda was chosen as the hostess of that event because both sides trusted her she could hold the tension and she and Cuthbert after the synod of Whitby had gone not the way either of them wanted they proceeded with great grace to help the church to adapt and to adopt the new things that had been agreed and to work their way and be part of the one true holy catholic and apostolic church that was hard a lot of people picked up their toys and went off back to Ireland Cuthbert had a terrible time on holy island if you want to read what

[22:00] Bede says about the pretty awful meetings that went on there after the synod and a load of the most outspoken monks had gone but even those that were left were all kind of niggling about all sorts of things and they didn't want this and they didn't want that and he had a really rough time Hilda would have done too but she had the grace and the wisdom and the perseverance to see her way through that we also know that the final six years of her life were dominated by a painful and debilitating illness a high fever that never left her says Bede imagine six years of the worst flu that you've ever had it's not a good thought is it no antibiotics but she carried on she continued to give

thanks she continued to lead the worship of the community she continued to develop its ministry and its mission she continued to do the kind of things that facilitated other people to do stuff the wonderful story of Cadman the cowherd an ignorant man and yet somebody in whom she saw something of gifting and she encouraged him and she drew out of him that gift so that he didn't hide away at the times of the offering of gifts and so was born a ministry of worship songs in the vernacular the first folk songwriter in the

English language as far as we know encouraged by Hilda where she broke a whole series of rules by bringing this man from the outside into the heart of the monastery to learn scriptures with the monks because rules are not there to be making us hidebound their guidance is to be broken at appropriate moments when the grace of God demands that they are but life was not easy for Hilda pioneering women's leadership in that kind of culture in that what is still a very violent age was not going to be easy having people like Wilfred getting all alpha male around her you imagine that exerting his amazing desire for power he was a real power hungry man also a powerful evangelist interesting how those things go together he understood a lot of the gospel did

Wilfred he was a missionary he was a church builder but he wasn't content with small wooden buildings where people focused on God he wanted huge stone monsters of places full of gold and jewels now of course his argument was that those things pointed to the glory of the God who is greater than all and in some ways they do but they very easily point to the glory of a man who has built his own kingdom richer than all the kings around him was Bishop Wilfred interesting times but times of pressure times when 2 Corinthians chapter 1 I do not want you to be uninformed about the hardships we suffered could have been written for

Hilda and yet she clung on to the fact that all the promises of God are yes and amen in Christ and she continued to live that life not die heavily triumphalistic but embracing the paradoxes of the glory and the suffering this is robust faith in a real world afflicted but not crushed perplexed but not driven to despair persecuted but not forsaken struck down but not destroyed Hilda like Paul knew that this was the call of the gospel to be as

Paul says in Philippians 3 to be identified with Jesus in both the power of the resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings so there are some things that Hilda can really teach us today I think Hilda tells us that we can come to God and live a life that is deeply influential while we struggle and while we are still unhealed that friends is good news we don't have to wait till God has sorted out everything in our lives before we can serve him before we can change what goes on around us in the world not at all God takes those broken pots God takes those struggling lives and by his glorious grace makes something out of us

[28 : 50] Hilda's life tells us that anything as profoundly worthwhile and life changing as building a colony of heaven on earth will be fraught with toil sweat tears and struggle if you want to do anything worthwhile dear friends it's got toil sweat tears and struggle written all over it not sure whether that's good news or not but it's true my life says it's true we've done a lot of that toil sweat and tears stuff and we pray that some of it will indeed last because the foundations are not straw

Hilda tells us that the only way to sustain and this is an interesting point the only way to sustain such a vibrant and godly life and ministry for the long haul in brackets is through a daily life of the disciplines of worship prayer fasting sacrificially serving you see we tend to fall by the wayside if those things are not in place god is calling his people back in this day and this generation to those disciplines not because of what it is to be disciplined in itself but because they all lead deeply into the heart of god they lead us nearer they lead us to the throne of grace love and that is the place where we need to be the disciplines are not an end in themselves but they are a means to an end the journey into the heart of divine love that's the place from which lasting ministry will grow and be sustained so as I finish

I want to take you to a few verses that spoke to me earlier on this week and they're in Jeremiah chapter one of all places scripture is good Jeremiah chapter one now some of you may have views about Jeremiah which may be based on fact or may be based on the horrible things that people say about him the first few verses of this chapter describe a context and they are shorthand you need to read two kings 21 22 23 24 to get the bigger picture the context is the 13th year of the reign of Josiah now Josiah was a goodie Josiah was bringing reform to the land of Judah he was part of the rediscovery of the scriptures and the reading of the scriptures and the bringing of a godly way of life into the nation again but my goodness he was up against it because Amos not Amos but Amos and before him his father Manasseh 55 years on the throne he was a serious baddie and he had led the

people astray systematically over years and years and years and there was moral and social degradation worship of the living God had really disappeared into the margins around a whole land of apostasy and ritual sacrifice and all sorts of horrible things and after

Josiah it went back the same way and two of the kings are mentioned in those first few verses the two who were there for 11 years each so 22 years of horror there were also two others who only lasted months but all four of them were a recipe of nastiness and during all of that the judgment of God is beginning to be worked out through the Egyptians on the one hand and through Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians on the other I wonder how you feel about our day and our generation times of social and moral decline I'm afraid so times of political turbulence yes and what does God say here verse 4 verse 5 the word of the

[35 : 06] Lord came to me I love this before I formed you in the womb I knew you before you were born I set you apart you see God is always planning and doing something before God doesn't get caught out God is never on the hop about what's going on God has seen God knows and God plans God prepares God has purposes for his chosen that's you that's me God has purposes for us in this day and in this generation before

I formed you in the womb says God oh did I have plans for you plans for good God has been preparing you God has been preparing me for such a time as this to quote Esther such a time as this but then notice Jeremiah's reply oh sovereign Lord I don't know how to speak I'm only a child do you do that a very human reply I'm only I'm just just what only what you're a child of the king of heaven you're not an only anything you're not a just anything my my what does God say verse seven the Lord said to me do not say I am only don't do that just don't do that God how often we listen to our own self limiting narratives do you do that as a little voice in the back of your head a little voice that sits on your shoulder and says you're not up to much really are you you messed that up again God won't keep forgiving you you know or if only you'd gone to the proper school if only you'd got that degree if only you'd his little voice sit on his shoulder and say that to you God says and this is the only voice that matters

God says do not say if only do not say I am only a whatever because if God is for you nobody else has a dog's chance if God has put his hand on your life if God is speaking into your heart do it do it because you and God together can do anything that God pleases as long as you do it together you and me together says father let me write the story of what is yet to be let me set you free from the roles that have increasingly cramped and constrained your soul you know sometimes our roles can be at war with our souls and we have to make some brave choices to step out of those things that have constrained and limited us or are increasingly doing so into the freedom of God's leading and God's provision for us and so my prayer for you this morning is that you will grow up in the reality of the glory and grace and of your own fragility the old jars of clay in the reality of the world as it really is but with a God who is bigger than all of that a God who is the creator the sustainer the redeemer the lord and the king of it all and when he calls us out to do stuff hey let's do it because we need Hilda's community back in Whitby we need people coming to Whitby for the fun of the gospel the gospel that gives life the gospel that redeems the gospel that sets free may he do it in us may the spirit be free may we dare to be out of our depth in his love that's the only place to be it's scary friends Ruth and I are just beginning to plan to move away from Holy Island because God seems to be calling us to what feels like the ends of the earth it's actually the top of the Shetland Islands to go and establish a little place of prayer from which

[42 : 08] God can do whatever God wants to do that's scary there's only 50 people on the little island we're buying a house on and there's no shop and they don't sell petrol or diesel there but when God tells you to do something you know what an adventure what an adventure and I just want to say to you dare to do that thing that God is planting in your heart yes of course check it out with your brothers and sisters pray over it seriously but what God is asking of us is availability it's not for us to say that we are necessarily suitable for this or this it takes other people to come together and say that but we can offer ourselves we can make ourselves available to the king of glory and watch this town get changed and watch our nation be called back to the faithful love of God let's pray dear God

I want to be out of my depth in your love father when that scares me it's just because I really don't know you well enough and there's too much pride left have mercy Lord on me have mercy on my friends and brothers and sisters here this morning that we may take the risk that faith is take the risk of falling into your arms take the risk of letting go some of the human securities to which we have

