

Wednesday 18th November
Hilda, Abbess of Whitby
Ephesians 4.1-6

Today the church remembers Hilda who lived in the 7th century in Northumberland. She was of royal birth and took religious vows in her 30s. She founded the great religious community of Whitby which became a centre of learning. Whitby was chosen as the venue for a key meeting where the future of the church in Britain was decided. At the time there were different forms of Christianity being practised in these islands; what we call Celtic Christianity, the older form, in which Hilda had been brought up, and the Roman form of the faith introduced by Augustine in 597AD.

The Synod of Whitby decided to adopt the Roman tradition, and Celtic forms receded. Hilda as Abbess in Whitby at the time is remembered as a reconciling influence; no doubt feelings ran high as they often do in matters of religious faith, and often between those whose beliefs and practices are actually very similar indeed – but differ in certain crucial areas. We might expect Hilda to support one side, to oppose the Roman influence, but instead she worked to help others accept the decision of the Synod graciously and to reconcile potential enemies. So Hilda is remembered as a peacemaker. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’, says the Beatitude, ‘for they shall be called children of God’.

Paul in his letter to Ephesus, urges unity and peace. Divisions already threatened the young church even at that very early stage. Paul, in prison awaiting likely execution, would have had his mind concentrated on what really matters; so he writes to urge the church to set aside differences and concentrate on common ground; being members of one body, baptised into the same faith and saved through the same death of Jesus Christ, worshipping God the Father. ‘Maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ he says.

We often use words derived from this passage as we introduce the Peace during the Eucharist and prepare to shake hands with each other - or in whatever way to share the Peace. At present of course we have to share the peace without physical contact, but the hand shaking is only symbolic anyway. What matters more is to realise what we are expressing; the oneness of Christ in which we all share. This doesn't mean we are all the same or we all agree on every opinion or view. That would be a kind of uniformity which would suppress our individuality. Diverse as we are, we are united by our faith in Christ. To realise this and let it affect our behaviour, the way we relate to each other across the whole body of Christ in the world, to do that is challenging, so it's not surprising that Paul writes – ‘*make every effort* to maintain the unity’; ‘bear with one another in love’. We will need the virtues of patience, he says, and gentleness, and humility – that's an important one – humility helps us to remember that I am not always right. Only if we do this, Paul says, are we worthy of our calling.

Hilda put every effort into supporting or bringing about this sense of unity despite probably her own disappointment at the way things were going. I really admire her graciousness in that. We are not always going to like the things that happen, the way our church community develops, in every detail. Some people hate sharing the peace; or the contemporary language service; or the ordination of women; or whatever. But these different views should not be allowed to undermine our unity in the faith of Christ. If they do...we are putting the cart before the horse.

There is one body, one Spirit; in the words of the hymn, *Thy hand O God has guided* – One Church, one Faith, one Lord.