

## St. Hilda

Last Sunday, I spoke about how the stories and experiences of women in the Church have not been heard much over the centuries. So this morning, as we prepare for the Feast of All Saints, I would like to take time to talk about a woman who had a major impact on the early church in Britain - St. Hilda of Whitby.

Hilda was born in the year 614 AD - she was the great niece of King Edwin of Northumbria. At that time, St. Aidan, trained on the Island of Iona, had been sent to establish a monastery on the island of Lindisfarne in Northumbria. Today, this is the area that is the border between England and Scotland on the east coast. In those days, monasteries were a simple collection of small buildings for communal living, prayer and education. There was a great need to teach people how to read and write.

Hilda became a nun in 647, and under the direction of Aidan started establishing monasteries. Ten years later she established her final and most famous monastery at Whitby. It was a double monastery, a community of men and a community of women, with a chapel in between. Hilda, as Abbess, was in charge of both, and her position there was very much like that of a bishop.

A highly educated woman, Hilda was passionate about the study of Scriptures, and the thorough education of clergy. Her faith, vision and hard work meant that before long, Whitby was recognized as one of the finest centres of learning on the Island of Britain.

The great English historian the Venerable Bede, in his Ecclesiastical History of the English People published in 731, records that Whitby, under Hilda's leadership, became the centre of a Christian renaissance. Bede honoured Hilda as one who helped establish the emerging nation of England.

He wrote: "Not only was Hilda an outstanding example of holy life to all who were in her monastery, but she also provided an opportunity for salvation and repentance for many who lived far away and who heard the happy story of her industry and virtue.....So great was Hilda's prudence that not only ordinary people but also kings and princes sought and received her advice when they were in difficulties.

Not only was she a great teacher, but Hilda was also known as someone who regarded everyone equally, regardless of wealth or status. She compelled those under her direction to devote so much time to the study of the holy Scriptures and so much time to the doing of good works. In her time, Whitby produced 5 bishops for the growing church.

But trouble was brewing at that time. The Christians in the south were following the Roman tradition and the Christians in the North were following the Celtic traditions.

For some, it was important for the Church to be more unified in its traditions. It was decided that a Synod should be held - a large gathering of learned persons to discuss the issues and choose which tradition make official.

The Abbess Hilda was the one called upon to host what became known as the Synod of Whitby in 664. This was a very important gathering for the Church, and it was no accident that the meeting was held at Hilda's monastery.

Bishop Colman of Lindisfarne and Hilda, Abbess of Whitby represented the Celtic Church; Bishop Wilfrid the Roman. Bishop Colman argued in favour of the practice of Columba – founder of Iona – who had followed the tradition of the apostle and evangelist St. John; Wilfrid argued the Roman position, based on the Council of Nicaea, the Papacy, and Church founded on St. Peter. But all the positions aside, the reality was that the Roman tradition was more organized and well equipped to assert itself.

So in 664, the vibrant Celtic Christian Church in Northumbria was brought into the mainstream of the Roman Church. Hilda, although greatly preferring Celtic customs, used her moderating influence to encourage the peaceful acceptance of the decision.

Unfortunately, the dominance of the Roman Church meant that the role of women in the councils of the church became diminished. Bishop Colman and Hilda had presided over the Synod of Whitby as equals. But the Roman Church did not recognize women as equals. And so the leadership of women in the church has been recovering from the Synod of Whitby ever since. It has taken literally, centuries to regain this equality.

In the summer of 1975, the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada voted in favour of the ordination of women. Many were vehemently opposed. Nevertheless, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, 1976, six women, in four dioceses were ordained priests of the Anglican Church of Canada. One of those first women was Mary Mills, ordained in our St. Paul's Cathedral in London as a priest of the Diocese of Huron. This November 30<sup>th</sup> we will be once again having ordinations at St. Pauls' - our diocesan cathedral in London. And this November 30<sup>th</sup> marks the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that historic event.

As the voices of women are heard more and more, let us give thanks to St. Hilda of Whitby. A voice from 1300 years ago.

In the words of the Venerable Bede, Hilda "never ceased to give thanks to her Maker or to instruct the flock committed to her care."

Hilda died on November 17<sup>th</sup>, in the year 680. We give thanks for her gifts of holiness, teaching, counsel and wisdom, which were used to nurture holy gifts in others, that they might serve one another, following the way Jesus in word and action.

Amen.