

Reflection for 17th November

What a wonderful month November is in the church's year!

We begin with that great shout of praise when we give thanks for all the saints:

"For all the saints who from their labours rest,
Who thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy name, O Jesu, be for ever blest.

Alleluia"

And now, this week, we have commemorations of many British saints.

Yesterday was the feast day of St. Margaret of Scotland. Margaret was born around 1045 in exile in Hungary. She was the granddaughter of the English king Edmund Ironside. Her mother was German. She was brought to England in 1057 when she was about twelve years old. After the Norman conquest in 1066 she was again a refugee seeking safety in Scotland. She was about 25 years old when she married King Malcolm III of Scotland. They had six sons and two daughters. Margaret lived out her life as queen and mother. She showed special care for the welfare of orphans and the poor. She was an excellent mother, brought many reforms to the court and to the Scottish church, bringing the latter in closer line with the rest of the western church. Her son, David, was one of the best of the Scottish kings and was also revered as a saint in his homeland. Her daughter Matilda married Henry I of England and so she became a distant ancestor of our present Queen. Margaret has always appealed to me because she was not a monastic, celibate, martyr or outstanding teacher of the faith; she was an ordinary wife and mother living a faithful Christian life in the circle of her own home and family. Yes, she was a queen. But most of all she was a good mother and loyal wife, and also a lady who showed great compassion to the poor and needy around her.

But Margaret is not the only British saint honoured this week.

Today is the feast day of St. Hugh of Lincoln, for 16 years bishop of the largest diocese in England and not afraid to stand up against kings when need arose. In 1178 Henry II founded a Carthusian monastery at Witham in Somerset. Hugh refused to become its prior until the king had paid compensation, to the last penny, to the people he had turned out of their homes to make way for the building of the priory. It was after eight years as prior that Hugh left the quiet monastic life at Witham to become Bishop of Lincoln. He died in London in 1200.

Thursday is the feast day of St. Hilda of Whitby, who was born in Northumbria in 614 and died at Whitby in the convent she founded there in 680. Among other things she insisted on the study of the scriptures and proper preparation for the priesthood. It was at the convent she founded in Whitby that a conference was held to decide between Celtic and Roman ecclesiastical customs. Hilda supported the Celtic party. Celtic spirituality is being rediscovered in the church today, especially in the move towards outdoor worship and connecting the practice of our faith with everyday things and the outdoor world.

Then on Friday we celebrate our own King Edmund, who was martyred by invading Danes, probably near Thetford where the Danes had established their headquarters. Edmund led his troops against them but was defeated and martyred when he refused to surrender his kingdom to the heathen invaders.

We end this month of celebrations of heroes and heroines of the faith with the feat of St. Andrew the Apostle on 30th November. What a month of example and encouragement it is, as we look forward to Advent and the quiet preparation for Christmas that that season brings. We end the church year on a note of praise as we look forward to new beginnings.

“Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” *Hebrews 12, v 1-2*

“But lo, there breaks a yet more glorious day;
The saints triumphant rise in bright array:
The King of Glory passes on his way.

Alleluia

From earth’s wide bounds, from ocean’s farthest coast,
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
Singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Alleluia.”

W. Walsham How (18312-1897)