

**St George's, Jesmond**

**18<sup>th</sup> February 2018      6pm**

**Evensong   Year B   Lent 1**

**Having had a massive** sort of out the Christmas decorations as I put them back into the garage my sorting out continued with the pile of boxes I had pushed into the back of the garage when I retired and moved into Gosforth eleven and a half years ago. In those boxes were some photo albums and as I picked one up out fell a long narrow photo of a school class photograph. It was the last days of Year 3 of the Junior school in Saltburn by the Sea, where I was brought up, and it was early July 1955 and I was still 8 years old, though only just.

**Looking along the four rows** of Year 3, there were 44 in the class, I was amazed how many I remembered though most of them I never saw again after we all left the junior school. Up front in the middle was the class bully Martin Bull, all puffed up and taking charge. Next to him Carol Shotton who really was in charge. Tucked further out and back was Derek Wiley who sang with me in the church choir, Richard Hornsby the rich farmer's son and so they went on. Most of course I could almost recognise the faces but not their names. And tucked on the back row way off to the side looking rather sheepishly at the camera was me. If you weren't me looking for me you would have passed me by without noticing.

**Now I tell this story because** in the Church's calendar we celebrate today a local saint whose history has largely passed us by. A man of considerable promise, who considered himself an absolute failure and retired into obscurity to the land from which he had originally come. A man who many, including the Venerable Bede thought was as sharp as mustard, which is very appropriate because his name was Colman.

**Colman was the second Bishop** of Lindisfarne after Aidan. An Irishman, who had gone to Iona and hence to Lindisfarne. A man firmly fixed in his Irish and Scottish background, learning and tradition. A man of firm faith and of great austerity. In his History of The English Church and People Bede speaks of how King Oswy, brother of King Oswald, highly regarded Colman's inherent good sense.

**But Colman lived in troubled times.** Much debate was bubbling up over the difference in keeping the date of Easter between the Irish/Scottish tradition in the north and the Roman tradition in the South.

As we all know this finally came to head with the calling of the Synod of Whitby in 664. Wilfred, the powerful and ambitious bishop of Ripon, York and then Hexham was lead speaker for the Roman/continental viewpoint and Colman lead speaker for the Irish/Scottish viewpoint. (In some circles Wilfred is known as the nastiest saint in heaven, but we won't go into that)

**Bede records the debate** over the dating of Easter in great detail. Colman was utterly out played by Wilfred. King Oswy who was presiding over the proceedings proclaimed that the Roman tradition was better argued and the rest is history. Colman was deeply disappointed, retired from being Bishop of Lindisfarne, retired under a shadow back to Iona and hence back to his native Ireland where he died on this day in 676. He retired and died believing himself to be an utter failure and no one could persuade him otherwise. And yet history has been rather kinder to him. Bede extols him giving a glowing account of his person and ministry. It is a shame that rather like the school photo I talked about it is Aidan, Cuthbert, Wilfred, Hilda and the rest that crowd into the middle of the front row and Colman and lots of others of the northern saints who are squeezed rather to the back and to side.

**So why do we honour** this apparent failure as a saint? His failure was in his own mind. Certainly he had been outwitted by Wilfred but Colman remained faithful to the tradition in which he had been brought up and honoured to his dying day.

**Perhaps after all in** those school class photos we all have tucked away somewhere it is the ones we pass over that God holds as dear as the ones who push themselves forwards.

**In the first lesson tonight** it is the serpent that outwits Eve by reasonable sounding argument to pick the fruit, whatever it was, eat it and offer it to Adam. Because of their disobedience to God they are driven out of the Garden of Eden but they are not forgotten nor disregarded, for from them, by Biblical tradition, comes the human race. Their disgrace becomes the means of the human family. The writer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson, St Paul was considered one of the greatest enemies of the early church until his conversion on the Damascus Road. It is out of the darkness that fell upon him after his experience there that new light began to dawn.

**We hear tonight how Paul**, writing to the growing church in Rome, points to how light can grow out of the darkness of sin if we turn to the light rather than the darkness. Christ's harrowing of hell brought those who had died back from utter darkness into the light of Resurrection life. The free gift of righteousness of which Paul speaks is a gift of grace through the life and death and Resurrection of Jesus.

**In the light of that perhaps** all the arguments in all the synods anywhere and everywhere at any time pale rather. We know in our own time in our own church in synods of deanery, diocese and the General Synod there are those who stand firmly for what they believe to be the truth as they see it. There are those who seemingly win and those who seemingly lose. But as we all know in the end it is the light of Christ that will shine on regardless despite the arguments of man, however erudite those arguments may be.

**Colman thought he was a failure.** I know many people in the latter parts of their lives who believe they have been failures in comparison to others. I have been there myself and have never really ever convinced myself of ever being much else. I may have had my moments but I've never done much that has been life changing. For people and for those like me Colman perhaps becomes our patron saint. The patron saint for those who think they have failed. And perhaps that's why we still remember him. Perhaps he was rather sharper in a mustard-like way because he brought his own flavour to the faith and tradition in which he was taught and ministered. Perhaps there is rather more warmth in his memory like the after-taste good mustard can offer to bring out the taste of good food rather than just dominate it.

**Just like Martin Bull in the front row** on my Class 3 photo there are always the bullies who like to push themselves forward. And there are those who would put Wilfred there. But we must not ignore the quieter, gentler, shyer ones in the sides and back row of the photo either of school or in the great group photo of the saints of God because each one of them is loved by God and by the Church. Each one of them has a special skill and something special to offer us.

**Perhaps when each one** of us is feeling a bit down, feeling a bit of a failure, Colman, whose feast day we keep today, is the man to talk to. On our Lenten journey perhaps we can look at the mental picture we have of the whole company of saints and have a better awareness of those who are not on the front row. They perhaps have far more knowledge and experience of what we are going through at any point in our lives. A conversation with Colman and his like on our Lenten journey

through the wilderness may give us more hope and reassurance than we might expect.

**And here is an essay title** for your Lenten homework this coming week. It comes from Cuthbert Kennedy and takes us back to the first reading tonight..

***Discuss the following proposition – Where would men be today without women? In the Garden of Eden eating watermelon and taking it easy.***

**Amen**