

WOMENS HISTORY IN THE CHURCH - ST HILDA

Am I preaching on our Bible Readings today? No...for something else has prompted me to use another style. A topical one. Most of you were aware that last year most of the Anglican Church of Australia celebrated 30 years since the first women were ordained to the priesthood. Wayne wanted to celebrate here, where three of us have worked – Susanna Pain, Elaine Gifford and I and we did on the Sunday before Christmas at 10am.

The Diocese on November 5th celebrated with six of the original 11 in the Cathedral in Goulburn a service prepared by the sub-dean, Ann Wentzel.

In Anglican News, our Diocesan Paper, Bishop Carol wrote an account of the occasion. As it is on-line now, most of you would not have seen it. There was a fine photo of us. But as I read Bishop Carol's account of the background to 1992, I went – what! She's confused the timing of a legal appeal and she's omitted the important General Synod which, after decades, finally allowed Dioceses to go ahead. This history is only 30 years ago, but, it seems, it's only clear to those who lived through it.

At a fine arvo tea afterwards someone said that there are several applicants to the Diocese for consideration next year, but all men. And in a letter to clergy from our Bishop Mark, he wanted to discuss how to encourage more women.

In my 34 years I realised I have never preached a sermon or given a talk on the benefits of women in leadership.

Awareness of history can matter, so today I will give you a slice of history, a 7th century slice about one woman who was a great leader and was decisive in a change to Christianity with effects down to our parish here. Some of you already know this. I am speaking of St Hilda or Hild. I remember that Sarah Macneil, before she became our first female Diocesan Bishop, was chaplain at Girls Grammar, and gave a talk on Hilda.

In 614 when she was born, most of England was pagan again because Christianity went away when the Roman legions left. With the collapse of Roman rule, Angles and Saxons arrived. It was a time of political and religious change. There were wars between kingdoms in England.

There was still Celtic Christianity in the far north and Celtic missionaries were arriving from Ireland.

St Augustine sent 40 monks from Rome to the Canterbury area.

When she was a child, Hilda's family were exiled when her father was murdered. They moved to the court of her great uncle King Edwin of Yorkshire. Edwin, a pagan, had married a Christian princess from Kent who brought with her, her Roman missionary priest. Edwin became a Christian. He and Hilda, aged 13, were baptised at Easter, the time for baptisms after preparation during Lent.

People were being converted by the Romans but were much influenced by the Irish monk Aidan, Bishop of Lindisfarne. He thought much of Hilda's abilities and Christian character.

When she was 33, she heard God call her to devote her life to him as a nun. This was a late call as people only lived to 40. Bishop Aidan asked her to start a new monastery. Usually nuns lived in a nunnery and monks in a monastery. They were also called Abbeys. This one however was to be for men and women. Hilda in charge, was the Abbess – a very important role. She was so respected for her wisdom and judgment that she was asked to take over another monastery of

men and women at Whitby. It was founded in 657. Many women pioneers have followed her example to train others.

She insisted on proper standards of prayer, quiet, study of the Scriptures and good works. As in the book of Acts, they shared everything, however rich or poor.

Bede the father of English wrote about her. Five men from the monastery at Whitby became outstanding bishops. Bishops from other dioceses sent their ordination candidates to her school. Just as we had candidates from Bathurst and Ballarat in Canberra.

She hosted the Great Synod of Whitby in 664. Why was there a synod? The Celtic and Roman churches had different dates for Easter! So some were feasting while others were fasting. King Oswui who presided, used one date and his Queen another. There was lots of strong feelings and debates. Hilda spoke for the Celtic churches, but the Celtic Irish followed the Roman cycle. It is still the same today between the Western and Eastern Orthodox churches. All the Celtic Church was there. Another issue was the style of tonsures – a simple Celtic ring or hair down the back of the head as well like the Romans. Were they all to join with the Roman Church? Rightly or wrongly, Hilda and the king of Northumbria led their people into unity. This set the course for the future of Christianity in England. We could say it led to the English Reformation and the creation of the Church of England and so to us here.

It is only since the 1980's that we've recovered a lot of the riches of the Celtic church. It was more mystical and less authoritarian. They valued nature and the environment so much which is in line with today. They allowed women to be leaders, even to inheriting property. English law meant that in early Australia, a rural widow could not inherit her husband's land. It went to his family.

On my exchange in the 1990's to the west of England I learned of Esther de Vaal's work. She now has a worldwide reputation as writer, speaker and retreat leader on Celtic and Benedictine spirituality. I bought a book of hers at the retreat Susanna led for the parish last year.

Well, what a role model was Hilda of Whitby, diplomat and saint. She is the patron saint of learning, culture and poetry. She encouraged a servant Caedmon, who became the first great English poet.

100 years after her death, the Danes invaded Northumbria and destroyed the old abbey. The site now has the ruin of an 11th C Benedictine Abbey. In 1893, St Hilda's College was established at Oxford. She is pictured in a stained glass window of the 13th C at Christ Church in Oxford. She died aged 66 in 680.

We can thank God for this outstanding Christian leader and pray for many more like her.

I'll finish with a Celtic Blessing.

Revd Anne Dudzinski
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