



THE ARCHBISHOP



672 AD at Ripon Cathedral

“Put out into the deep water; prepare your nets for a catch.” (Luke 5. 4)

It is a great joy to be with you today to help celebrate the 1350th anniversary of the foundation of this great church and the climax of a year of celebrations.

I thank and congratulate you for your vision; for the service you offer to this city and region; and for the part you play with Bradford and Wakefield Cathedrals in serving this great Diocese of Leeds.

Thank you, Bishop Nick, for your courageous and visionary leading of this, the youngest, and at the same time one of the oldest, diocese in England. And thank you, Dean John, for your invitation to preach this morning and for your wise and imaginative leading of this cathedral church.

I have a great love for and devotion to Saint Wilfrid.

I'll say that again.

I have a great love for and a devotion to Saint Wilfrid. It's not a sentence you often hear!

From a certain – and in my view rather skewed post-Reformation view of English Church history – Wilfrid ends up the villain of the piece. He is a ‘romaniser’, we are told – and expected to boo and hiss in response. Winning the day at the Council of Whitby in 664, we are told Wilfrid destroyed the beautiful, cuddly, tree-hugging, peace-loving, eco-friendly Celtic Church. “Off with his head! I hear you say.

But does any of this bear scrutiny?

Wilfrid was certainly a controversial figure. He was powerful, influential, persuasive, stubborn.

When he was elected to be Bishop of York he chose to be consecrated in France. When he returned St Chad had been installed in his place.

When he was able to take up office three years later the then Archbishop of Canterbury chose to divide the Diocese of York into three without his consent, rather like what happened to the Diocese of Leeds in reverse. He appealed directly to Rome, and so, yes, he was controversial; yes, opinionated; and yes, difficult sometimes, but he was also a visionary, an evangelist, and the church planter, one of the greatest architects of the church we have received in this land.

On his way to Rome, he evangelised and planted churches in Frisia where he is remembered to this day.

He was the first person to put glass into church windows.

He championed the Rule of St Benedict which has had such a huge influence on English church life and of course continues to do so today.

Beneath our feet is the Saxon crypt of his original church, the church for the Benedictine community he established here in 672.

The main reason I have a love and devotion for Wilfrid is because my first incumbency was at St Wilfrid's, Chichester. And in that part of England, he is, to this day, remembered and named 'Apostle of Sussex.'

Bede gives us the story. Returning from Rome – another visit and another controversy, if I remember correctly - his boat went adrift in the Channel, and he landed on the Selsey peninsular. There was a famine in the region at the time. Wilfrid and his companions took the eel nets that the locals used in the rivers of that swampy peninsular, tied them together, cast them into the sea, thus inventing trawling and procuring a great catch of fish.

The people were fed, and Wilfrid then sat them down, and no doubt at some point turned to the stories from scripture we have just read, and told them about Jesus Christ and the bread of life eternal that he came to bring.

"By this good turn," writes Bede, "the bishop won the hearts of all, and the people began to listen more readily to his teaching."

What is now the Diocese of Chichester was first, Selsey, a church built on the site of this seemingly miraculous catch a fish and where Wilfrid preached the gospel for the first time.

Moreover, the reason he had been to Rome, and the reason he so often found himself opposed, and the reason he argued the way he did at the council of Whitby was not to destroy, dismantle or undermine the English Church, but to save it, demonstrating by the expansive breadth of his vision that the English Church had to be part of the world wide catholic Church if it was to flourish and grow. It could not live with separate jurisdictions, he argued. It had to be united.

There is a painfully relevant corollary with the challenges we face 1350 years later, both in our church and our nation.

Legitimate and conscientiously held difference within the church on various issues must not be allowed to become separate jurisdictions. The United Kingdom, despite the difficulties and divisions of Brexit (not to mention other challenges that you may have noticed in recent weeks), must not, cannot, conceive of itself as separate from the rest of Europe, nor able to buck the world, nor England within the United Kingdom and without our neighbours, nor the Church of England without ecumenical partners and neighbours, and are striving for unity.

Wilfrid had a big vision. An international vision, rooted in Benedict's rule as a way for the whole world to follow Jesus Christ. It is a vision for the way we inhabit the earth and have responsibilities to each other, across boundaries of denomination or nation or region. I simply believe it is a vision, one that unites us, we urgently need today. There is certainly no other way of facing the challenge of war in Europe, environmental catastrophe, economic upheaval and the horrifying discrepancies of wealth and opportunity in our own nation and the scourge of poverty that goes with it.

"Put out your nets for a catch," says Jesus (Luke 5. 4). Take hold of a bigger, more challenging, more expansive vision.

"Master, we have worked all night," says Simon, "but have caught nothing." (Luke 5. 5)

This is an all too typical, human response to a big vision.

It won't work.

We've tried it before.

Are you honestly still being so naive, so foolishly optimistic?

Are you having a laugh!

But then – amazingly and humbly - what we see in Peter is obedience.

Peter, despite hubris and bravado, is obediently faithful to a vision bigger than his own.

Wilfred, stubborn, wilful and opinionated, is obediently faithful to a vision bigger than his own.

“How blessed are the meek,” says Jesus, “They shall inherit the earth.” (Matthew 5. 5). We belong to Christ, and to each other.

The foundation of the Diocese of Leeds, the work of this Cathedral Church is also obediently faithful. Thank you.

We must be too obediently faithful to a bigger vision than our own.

And like Peter, be amazed at the results. And like Wilfrid, see the seeds of our endeavours still bearing fruit in centuries to come.

And, yes, also like Peter and also like Wilfrid, we will be aware of our shortcomings. And don't worry, if we're not, there will be no shortage of people to point them out!

And through this, to continue to hear Jesus calling us and challenging us to fresh endeavour the building of his kingdom and for his way of justice and peace.

Don't settle for mediocrity. For second best. For decline.

Don't give in to despair and division.

Put out your nets for a catch.

Move out into the deep waters.

Be the church for others, not for ourselves.

Strive for a greater and greater unity.

And by this the world will be changed and the world will believe. And by your vision; and by your faithful obedience, catch people: see how people's lives are changed and redirected by the good news of Jesus Christ, for he is among us again this morning breaking bread and inviting us to break bread with others.

This vision, this promise, we have in Christ is good news for everyone.

Amen.

7 min read

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofyork.org/speaking-and-writing/sermons/sermon-st-wilfrids-day-ripon-cathedral>