

## ST CUTHBERT

EDMUND HILL, O.P.

IF we were to go by modern political boundaries, we would think of St Cuthbert as a Scotsman. For the first instance Bede gives of the power of his prayers occurred at the mouth of the little river Tyne between North Berwick and Dunbar, and it was presumably in that district that he was born and bred. When he became a monk a few years later, it was at the abbey of Melrose. But then modern political boundaries have nothing to do with the case; those were the days, after all, when the Scots were the inhabitants of Ireland. In fact Cuthbert was a Northumbrian Angle, and the kingdom of Northumbria stretched along the whole East coast from the Humber to the Forth.

He was born perhaps a little before 630 A.D. and he was probably an orphan or a foundling; at any rate one of Bede's stories about him concerns a woman 'who had brought him up from his earliest childhood, and whom he was accustomed to call mother'. As a boy he seems to have been a good-humoured energetic little tough, always in the thick of the wrestling and scrapping that were the staple sports of his contemporaries, and tirelessly ready to take on fresh antagonists when the others were worn out. His boyhood conversion took place one day when they seem to have been indulging in contortionist acrobatics; *sicut ludantium levitas solet*, Bede informs us, *contra congruum naturae statum variis flexibus membra plerique sinuarent*. While Cuthbert was frivolously tying himself in knots with the rest of them, a child of three came and rebuked him, and told him to compose his limbs and his mind in a more stable attitude. There was general laughter at this, and the child burst into tears. Then as Cuthbert and the other boys gathered round to comfort him, he exclaimed, 'Why do you behave like this, Cuthbert, most holy bishop and priest, against your nature and your dignity? It is not proper for you to be playing among children, since the Lord has consecrated you to teach their elders virtue.' Cuthbert took the hint, and grew up forthwith.

Two things in this story are characteristic. The first is the

'psychic' element. We could almost say that Cuthbert caught the second sight from this child; he was to exhibit the gift time and again throughout his life. The second is more essential, and it is the quality of spontaneity and candour about Cuthbert that the story displays, his open responsiveness to people around him. As a boy he was evidently a good companion, and he remained so all his life, *affabilis et jucundus moribus* as Bede says. But from now on he was open and responsive to God and to all God's creatures as well with the same direct simplicity. This was to be the context of his gift of second sight and his powers of healing.

This spontaneity comes out in all the stories. It was typical of him that when, as a bishop, he was visiting a plague-stricken district, he should cure a dying child simply with a kiss. There was nothing harsh or severe about his holiness, even when he was constrained by his clairvoyance to speak words of foreboding. Here is a story that Bede puts in the mouth of Cuthbert himself.

Once when I was living as a hermit on my island, some of the brethren came to visit me on Christmas day, and asked me to leave my cell and celebrate the feast with them. I consented and went down to the guest-house with them, and we sat down to dinner together. But in the middle of the meal I happened to say to them, 'I beg you, brothers, let us be careful and vigilant, in case through carelessness and negligence we are led into temptation'. 'Please', they answered, 'let us spend today cheerfully, because it is the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ.' 'Yes,' I said, 'let us do so.' Then after we had been regaling ourselves some time with feasting, merry-making, and telling stories, I began warning them again that we should be instant in prayer and watchfulness, and prepared for the onslaught of any trial or temptation. 'Your teaching', they said, 'is good, very good; still, days of fasting, prayer, and vigil are plentiful enough. So let us rejoice in the Lord today, seeing that today the angel brought the shepherds tidings of great joy.' 'Good', I said, 'let us do so.' But as we carried on with our feasting and were spending a most enjoyable day, I repeated the same words of warning a third time; and then they understood that some great tribulation must be hanging over us. I did not know any more than they did what it would be; I had only been warned by a prompting of the mind that our hearts should be constantly fore-armed against sudden

storms of tribulation. When they returned to Lindisfarne next day, they found that a plague had already broken out, which was to carry off almost the whole community within a year.

The many stories in which animals figure are vivid illustrations of this sensitive openness of Cuthbert's mind and heart to every one and everything he encountered. The most famous is the story of the seals, which came and warmed his feet with their breath after he had spent the night in prayer standing in the sea up to his chin. Even about this austerity, conventional almost though it was in the high tradition of Celtic monasticism, there is an impression of Cuthbert's ingenuous spontaneity. One feels that he did not do it primarily to quench the fires of concupiscence or for any of the classical motives, but simply because he felt that the sea, at night, was the best place to pray in; by thus immersing himself in the immensity of God's creation he was enabled the more directly to immerse himself in the immensity of God. In Bede's lovely untranslatable phrase, *pervigiles undisonis in laudibus tenebras noctis exegit*. The seals recognized the sympathetic harmony that this man had re-established with them, with the element that was their home, and with God.

But together with this transparent serenity of temperament went an indomitable will. The most importunate pleas of a hospitable woman could not make him eat on a day when he was keeping the fast. But when Cuthbert was the host, not even an angel could withstand his insistent invitation to eat. Once some brethren who visited him on Farne ignored his kind injunction to cook and eat a goose that was hanging in the guest-house; in consequence they were weatherbound on the island for a week. 'If you want to go back home', he said when he came to see them on the seventh day, 'you must cook and eat that goose.' And no sooner was the goose boiling in the pot, says Bede, than the boiling of the sea subsided.

He had a limpid single-minded zest for whatever he was doing, whether it was observing a fast, or acting as host, or preaching to the half-pagan country people round Melrose, or ruling the monks of Lindisfarne, or being a hermit on Farne Island, or once more travelling as a bishop round his ill-defined diocese (his *paroecia*, Bede calls it), or back again in his hermitage, preparing to die. In everything the same unruffled good-humour

and the same ineluctable determination, because everything he did was cradled in his continuous prayer.

St Cuthbert was a great and famous wonder-worker; but the beautiful harmony of his character, so candid, so powerful, and so innocent, made him a man more wonderful than his works. He owed it to his having learned to open himself with every pore of his being to the wonder of God and his redeemed creation.

He died in his hermitage on Farne Island, on March 20th, 687, being perhaps a little less than sixty years old.



## A HOMILY OF ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ON THE PASSION<sup>1</sup>

TRANSLATED BY F.R.

‘**A**ND when Jesus was in Bethania, in the house of Simon the leper, there came to him a woman having an alabaster box of precious ointment, and poured it on his head as he was at table.’ (Matt. xxvi, 6f.) At first sight it seems as though all the evangelists refer to the same woman, but in fact this is not so. I think that three of them do, but that John is describing another, and more glorious person—the sister of Lazarus. Matthew’s apparently casual mention of Simon’s leprosy is to show why the woman came so confidently to Jesus. Leprosy was a filthy and repellent disease; and yet she saw that Jesus had healed the man (or he would not have chosen to remain in his company), and had now gone to his home. This made her certain that he could easily rid her soul of sin. Again, the mention of the place, Bethania, is significant. It shows that he came of his own free-will to his passion. He had before escaped from the very clutches of the Jews; now, when their hatred was at its height, he comes to a place only a couple of miles away. This shows that his earlier escapes were part of his deliberate plan. So, as I say, when the woman saw him there, she plucked up her courage and came

<sup>1</sup> Homily 80 on St Matthew.