

*Now let us praise the Guardian of heaven,
the might of the Ruler and His wisdom;
the work of the Glory-Father, as he, eternal Lord
created the beginning of all wonders.
He first shaped, the holy Creator,
for the children of old, heaven as a roof;
then the Guardian of humanity,
the eternal Lord, established middle-earth
for the children of earth, the almighty Lord.*

You may recognize here the words of Caedmon's Hymn, from eighth-century England. The Venerable Bede tells us of the shy lay brother Caedmon who, when the harp of song was passed around at the banquet, would flee to the stables. But one night an angelic figure appeared to him, saying "Caedmon: sing me something." Caedmon awoke with the hymn on his lips.

The story tells us much about Caedmon, but also much about the Venerable Bede, who relates it in his mammoth *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

The church has set apart May 25th as the day on which we especially remember Bede, this gentle man, the greatest scholar of his time in the Western church. How fitting that we at Holy Trinity should have named our chapel for Bede and put his name on our banner. And what a remarkable man and monk he was.

Take a moment to think of Bede. It is, after all, thanks to his influence that we number our years from the birth of Christ.

At the age of seven, Bede was brought by his parents to the monastery at Jarrow, near Durham. He was ordained deacon at nineteen, priest at 30. In his own words, “I wholly applied myself to the study of Scripture, and amidst the observance of regular discipline, and the daily care of singing in the church, I always took delight in learning, teaching, and writing.” Bede died in 735, on the eve of the Ascension. He died — of asthma, by some accounts — while dictating a translation into English of the Gospel of John.

Bede was, quite simply, the greatest scholar of his time in the Western Church. He wrote, in Latin and Old English, poetry, commentaries on the Scripture, works on chronology, poetics, and most importantly, history. His work is the primary source for our understanding of Anglo-Saxon England from its beginnings in 449 A.D. until the early eighth century.

Bede was acknowledged during his own time and from the moment of his death as an exemplary monk, ardent Christian, and devoted scholar. *He was named a “Doctor of the Church” by the Roman Catholic church — the only native-born Englishman ever so named — and was canonized in 1935.*

[Legend has it that the monk assigned to write his epitaph was at a loss for the right word to complete it:

*This grave contains
Bede the _____’s remains*

That night an angel filled in the blank for the poor monk:

*Hac sunt in fossa
Bedaе Venerabilis ossa*

Bede the Venerable it has been ever since.]

Bede's account of Caedmon is one of many stories from the Ecclesiastical History that show us Bede's profound understanding of the transformation of the old Germanic culture of the Anglo-Saxons into the new wine of Christianity.

In 597, about a century and a half after the pagan Angles and Saxons had arrived from the Continent to over-run the Christian Celts in Britain, pope Gregory the Great sent the missionary Augustine to reclaim the island for the faith. Though the outcome was by no means sure, by Bede's time Christianity was well on its way to overcoming paganism among the Anglo-Saxons.

How did it happen that the new dispensation so quickly overcame the old ways, so thoroughly as to produce a Caedmon or even a Bede himself? Part of the answer no doubt lies in the dedication and zeal of the missionaries, of course, but part must surely also lie in the ages-old Germanic warrior culture which the invaders had brought with them from the Continent.

The first-century Roman historian Tacitus described the *comitatus*, the tight-knit band of loyal followers and their king that was at the core of Germanic culture. The king provides protection to the people of the comitatus. They in turn pledge to defend him to the death.

In such a society, the highest virtue in the ruler is generosity. In the follower the highest virtue is loyalty, and the greatest sin is treachery. The worst fate that can befall a warrior is exile from his lord's company and from his hall. The archetypal place for the retainer (*thane* in Old English)

is with the beloved king, feasting in the hall — something we here at Holy Trinity can appreciate, I think.

In the greatest Old English poem, **Beowulf**, the anonymous author paints a picture of the great hall of Heorot and its wise king:

Hrothgar was given success in warfare, glory in battle, so that his thanes gladly obeyed him and their company grew into a great band of warriors....At the feast he gave out rings, treasure...The hall rang with the sound of the harp, the clear song of the minstrel...Thus these thanes lived in joy, happy, until one began to do evil deeds, a hellish enemy.

Please note that word *until*, a favorite of the Beowulf poet.

Each night the monster Grendel, whom Beowulf must kill, slaughters thirty of the king's thanes in their sleep. Grendel is the ultimate exile, driven to violence by the joys he cannot share. The horror of his ravages is directed not at warriors in battle but at men in the hall, the pattern of ordered society.

But what does all this have to do with Bede and the beginnings of the church in England? Perhaps much, as a way of illuminating the receptivity of this pagan culture to the good news of Christ.

It has been said that the unique contribution of Hebraic culture to the world was the sense, later subsumed into Christianity, of the purpose and end of history. God did not merely create the world, He is moving it forward in time.

Hebraism created and Christianity modified a genuine eschatology, as

opposed, for example, to the Greeks, who had creation myths but no sense of a forward motion of history.

In fact Germanic paganism did have an eschatology. The difference is that Germanic myth saw history moving downward to inevitable destruction. This middle-earth is moving toward its final end, when the one-eyed god Odin will fall to the grey wolf; and the world serpent will devour the tree of life; and giants will arrive in their ship made from the fingernails of the dead. That twilight will see men and gods together do battle with the giants and other elemental forces — like Grendel writ large — the forces of chaos and nightfall.

And nightfall will win. Warriors may live for a time in a world of pleasures and joys of the hall — *until*. Until the monsters come. And come they always will.

Nearly nine hundred years after Tacitus first described the culture of the comitatus, an Anglo-Saxon poet gave it its purest distillation. The Battle of Maldon describes how in 991 a small band of English warriors defended their homeland against a superior force of invading Vikings. Their leader lies fallen. Their end is near. An old retainer speaks an ancient credo:

hige sceal ðe heardra, heort ðe cenre,
mod sceal ðe mare, ðe ure maegen lytlað.

*Minds shall be harder, hearts the keener,
Courage the greater, as our might declines.*

There's a genuine poignancy to the way in which the Anglo-Saxon poets and writers viewed their ancestors' heroic age. Beowulf may kill the dragon ravaging his people, but his death in that fight means that his people will die in warfare. Still the mood is not despairing, as we might expect, but instead elegiac. The end is ever the same, but the deeds are noble and heroic nonetheless.

Bede and other Christian writers of the Anglo-Saxon era looked back on a haunted landscape of their past that would, in due course, be illuminated by the light of Christ. But the imaginative leap was perhaps not so great. Judas after all could be likened to a disloyal thane. Alienation from God could be represented as exile from the hall. The image of the generous king could become at times merged with that of the Father in heaven; at other times, with Christ at the head of his own comitatus, surrounded by his loyal band of disciples.

One of the most poignant of all the stories in Bede's Ecclesiastical History tells of the conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria. We are in (of course) a hall. The king has summoned his loyal retainers, so that they may hear the Gospel from a missionary sent by Augustine. Bede tells us:

To this teaching a counselor and nobleman gave assent, and spoke in this manner: 'It seems to me as follows, O King: that this present life of man on earth, in comparison with the time that is unknown to us, is as if you were seated at the banquet table with your counselors and retainers in the midst of winter; and the fire is kindled and the hall is warmed; but outside it rains and snows and storms.

‘Then there comes in a sparrow; it quickly flies through that hall. It comes in through one door, and goes out through another. And lo: during the time that it is within there is neither rain or storms of winter. But that time is the blink of an eye and the least of times; then it soon from the winter to the winter again returns.

‘So then, this life of man appears like the briefest space of time. What goes before, or what follows thereafter, we know not. And therefore, if this new teaching brings to us anything more certain and more fitting, then it is worthy that we follow it.’

And so, says Bede, King Edwin, and his court, and his kingdom all embraced the new teaching. In Bede’s work it is a defining moment of the missionary movement in England. The great commission to go forth and enlighten the world was being fulfilled. The light of Christ was being cast in the darkness. The spread of the Gospel was advanced. And the English church, whose descendants we are, was one step further on its way to glorifying God and exalting the ascended Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thus the church sets aside a prayer for Bede, to honor this great and gentle scholar:

Heavenly Father, you called your servant Bede, while still a child, to devote his life to your service in the disciplines of religion and scholarship: Grant that as he labored in the Spirit to bring the riches of your truth to his generation, so we, in our various vocations, may strive to make you known in all the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy

Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

adapted from a sermon by Cleve Callison, Ph.D.

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