

HOW WOULD ST. AIDAN TREAT GENTILES AND TAX COLLECTOR

Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Aidan, the patron saint of this parish. Aidan died on August 31 651 so the official day for the celebration is the 31st. However I have chosen to transfer the feast to today. There are readings provided specifically for this feast however I am not going to use those and will instead use the readings that normally occur on this day. I will use the gospel passage from Matthew and then speculate on how I think Aidan would have read, interpreted and then acted in response to this message. I think looking at this message through Aidan's eyes will give you a better sense of the saint that our parish is named after.

First I would like to provide a little information about Aidan, for we cannot begin to understand how he would have responded to this gospel until we know something about Aidan.

We do not know when Aidan was born but we know that he died on August 31 651. He was very well known in northern England at the time of his death and was immediately proclaimed the apostle of Northumbria.

Aidan made his mark on the world in part because someone else gave up in frustration at the task of converting Northern England to the Christian Faith. Much of England had at least heard of Christianity through the contacts with Rome. As Rome failed, England was conquered and Christianity lost its influence. Augustine of Canterbury was sent by the Pope to convert the heathens. This reintroduction of Roman Christianity eventually met up with the remaining Celtic Christians. Celtic Christianity had remained fairly strong during the dark years owing much to the work of St. Patrick, St. Columba and eventually St. Aidan.

Bishop Cormac was the first monk that was sent to Northumbria, but came back to the abbey at Iona complaining that he could not do anything with these English people. They were too pagan, too stiff necked and just would not take instruction, Cormac complained. King Oswald knew Aidan and called upon him to try again. Aidan took monks from Iona that were steeped in the Celtic world rather than from Roman monasteries.

He lived a simple very ascetic life. As a monk he owned nothing. Like the disciples he traveled on foot carrying very little. He ate what he was offered and stayed wherever someone would give him a place to sleep. There are two legends about him that address his approach to both possessions and charity. The venerable Bede reported that King Oswin (Oswald's successor) gave Aidan a fine horse and beautiful saddle. Aidan promptly gave it to a beggar. Oswald was furious, but Aidan said, "Is the son of a mare of more worth than a son of God?" Oswin apologized and never again questioned Aidan's generosity.

Aidan fasted every Wednesday and Friday and did not eat at the royal table, as was his right as a bishop. He was known to take the food he was given at a feast and give to the poor.

Aidan, like Patrick and Columba before him, set up not churches, but monasteries. In Celtic Christianity an abbot had a higher standing than a bishop. Their communal life was focused on abbeys and monasteries. Most of this part of England was comprised of small villages at best. The Roman style of conversion was to come into an established city, build a church and convert the people. They only went where people were already “civilized” and educated. Aidan was very successful in his work and left behind many monasteries and converts who remained Christian even in later dark times.

When Aidan would found a monastery he was building more than just a worship space. He was establishing a permanent presence in the community. He would train local boys to become monks. He supported women in the role as abbesses at their abbeys. What he did was to build a community centered on the gospel and that supported each other. This community provided not just a worship place, but a hospital, market place and an identity as the village would grow up around the monastery.

Most of chapter 18 in Matthew is a lesson in Christian community and focuses on how we are expected to treat each other. The passage just prior to today’s gospel is about the shepherd who goes out to find the one sheep, leaving the others. Of course no human shepherd would do this, but the point is that each of us is so important to God that he searches us out and rejoices when we are found. I think you can see how Aidan embodied this in his form of evangelism to the north country. Not content with caring for the flock of believers he went out after the lost sheep. Every soul was precious to him.

So it is in this context of a caring community that we hear today’s gospel message. There are two ways that this passage can be interpreted. I vividly remember reading an essay on this passage in the Living Church the last time this passage came up in the lectionary three years ago. The Living Church magazine in their comment on this passage used these words to call for the wider use of excommunication for those who will not repent. Now the problem is I suspect that the author of that article would probably like to throw this particular priest out as the flaming liberal that I am. The attitude seems to be comply with the party line or leave. This does not strike me as a very Christian attitude.

Allow me to provide an example of how this passage was used along this line of reasoning. There was a minister of a church in the city where I used to teach. He used this passage as the basis for “shunning” the unrepentant. There was a family who were seated in the church when this pastor called on them to stand. The pastor named whatever sin it was that they as a family had committed, and I wish I could

remember, for it did not seem terribly sinful to me and then called on all those present to turn their backs on them until they repented. He then turned away from them and waited until all the others did the same. The family walked out and never darkened the door of a church again. The children were students of mine and we were made aware because the other students in the building who attended the church were not allowed to speak with or even acknowledge the shunned children's existence. This was all done in the name of Christ.

Now I find myself asking does this sound like how the Aidan I have portrayed earlier would use this scripture. This interpretation seems so harsh and unlike the Jesus we see portrayed in scripture. Allow me to propose how I think Aidan would have used this passage.

I answer the question of how would Aidan follow the injunction to treat a person like a Gentile or a tax collector, by reflection on how Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors. If I am not mistaken he sat down and ate with them. A few even made it into the ranks of his disciples. This passage in fact this whole chapter of Matthew is not about punishment and exclusion, but about compassion and forgiveness. That is how I believe Aidan would have used this gospel message.

Once again I turn to Eugene Peterson and his translation of the Bible called *The Message*. He translates verse 17b as follows, "If he will not listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love." This is not about throwing people out, but continuing to remain in relationship with them. Is this a hard teaching, yes because it is so much easier to turn our backs on those with whom we disagree and say, I have no need of you. I however have a hard time imagining Aidan ever turning his back on anybody.

There is no cutting off of community here. There is no concept of ex-communication or shunning, but a command to continue to reach out. Permission is not given to stop the dialogue, to turn our backs and wash our hands of entire portions of society.

For me, when the time comes for me to answer for what I have done, I would rather explain to God that I was too willing to love, erred on the side of being too forgiving than have to explain that I excluded those who God would include. If I must be convicted, convict me of loving too much and too freely. I will gladly accept the consequences.

Jesus is often present with us in the last and least in the world. Jesus changes our definition of neighbor from those just like us to every human-being.

For the message of today's gospel is one of the openness and inclusive nature of the Christian community. This is a message that no one is outside of God's forgiveness, mercy and love. This is a message that we are all God's children and yes we should treat all as tax collectors and Gentiles, for those are the ones whom Jesus invited to

his table. He invites you to be bold enough to join him as well at the table in the community we call the church and live into all that this community demands.