

# Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

4 Easter  
May 7, 2006  
Fr Bill McGinty

## **“A Good Shepherd”**

Today we welcome Aidan into this community of Christ's Church and we celebrate with his parents and his grandparents the precious "gift of life" that he has become in their life.

Of all the names to call a child, who is to be baptized on this "Good Shepherd" Sunday none could be more fitting than "Aidan." Aidan was a Celtic Saint who had settled and belonged to the great Celtic Monastery of Iona off the West Coast of Scotland around 630AD.

When the King Edwin of Northumbria, in North East England, was killed in a battle in 633, his two sons, Oswald and Oswy fled to Iona for safety.

When Oswald returned home in 634 he defeated his father's enemies at the battle of Heavenfield and became King. He was determined to make Northumbria Christian, so he sent a message to Iona and they sent him Aidan. Of all the fiery and effective Celtic missionaries, Aidan was the gentlest, the sweetest and the most Christ like. Holiness and gentleness, simplicity and sympathy, radiated from his presence. He preached the word of God and he lived by his own teaching.

Aidan chose the Island of Lindisfarne as his headquarters in order to parallel on the East Coast the effectiveness of Iona in the West. Lindisfarne has become known as the Holy Island and the Island of the Mists. It became the cradle of northern Christianity from Edinburgh in the North to Lincoln in the Midlands. From here Aidan set out on his missionary journeys to bring faith to the pagan and warlike Britons. For twenty years Aidan's work flourished till worn out and exhausted he returned to Lindisfarne where he opened a school that was to become famous for its great scholars Cuthbert and Bede and was to become a beacon of light and learning that took Europe out of the Dark Ages.

When Aidan died in 65,1 it was the young shepherdboy Cuthbert, on a lonely hill, who had a vision of Aidan's soul being carried to heaven. Cuthbert left his hillside and his sheep and set out for Lindisfarne to continue the great work that Aidan had begun. There in Aidan's simple cell he found a poem that Aidan had written. It said:

“Leave me alone with God as much as may be.  
As the Tide draws the waters close upon the shore.  
Make me as Island, set apart,  
Alone with you, God,  
Holy to you.  
Then with the turning of the tide  
Prepare me to carry your presence to the busy world beyond.  
The world that rushes in on me.  
Till the waters come again  
and fold me back to you.

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Aidan and Cuthbert follow in along line of people who began their lives as Shepherds of sheep and became shepherds of God's people. We only have to think back to Patrick and farther to David, Joseph, Amos, Jacob and ultimately Abraham.

There is something about this role and imagery that appeals to the Biblical story of salvation. A shepherd is so much more than a minder of sheep. He is at once, a guardian, leader and protector.

Jesus in the Gospel uses the image of the Good Shepherd. "I am the good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep."

It is the perfect model of the Messiah. Israel the sheep, the Messiah, the shepherd, yet for all that, Jesus does not just leave us this as imagery of the Messiah. He instructs his disciples that they must be shepherds too.

I was contemplating this, this week in relation to this church. Not that it is called after Jesus as the Good Shepherd, but that it is called to be the Good Shepherd in the midst of these hills and in the midst of this community. A shepherd leads, guides and instructs when necessary he goes and seeks out the lost.

It is almost the perfect description of our church mission statement. Yes, we are a shelter and a refuge but we are also a mission and an outreach.

We have to be that island, that beacon of light that Aidan saw Lindisfarne to be. We have to be more than a pile of river stones cast up on the banks of the Delaware River. We are called by the Gospel to be shepherd.

For a while the shepherd may well have been asleep, but now, now the church of the Good Shepherd is awake. Around the diocese, people know that we are awake. In a few weeks time, our Evangelism Program will begin. It's invitation and welcome to the entire community, is our "wake up call," to remind ourselves why we are here and what we are about.

In the June addition of the "Cobblestone" on the front page, I sent a message to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, meeting in June, to remind them, what they too are suppose to be about. The message is entitled: "Wake up! Episcopalians, wake up."

1. Wake up to the fact that people are dying of Aids while you are debating the Anglican Communion.
2. Wake up to the fact that our children are being neglected while the adults play: "Who is or who isn't an Episcopalian?"
3. Wake up to the fact that we need to project our mission.
4. Wake up to the fact that the average man in the streets has little idea what "Episcopal" means or stands for.
5. Wake up to the fact that, Episcopalians care little about hierarchy and everything about Outreach, Justice and the Marginalized.

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6. Wake up to the fact that unless Africa is written into your budget, it is lip service to claim “Africa is written on your heart.”
7. Wake up to the fact that our Western lifestyle is destroying the planet and we need to scream: “Stop!”
8. Wake up to the fact that ordinary men and women in our pews want leadership.
9. Wake up to the fact that Evangelism comes after a transformation of the heart.
10. Wake up to the fact that we need to rebuild our nation’s spirit and not waste time in maintenance of old buildings.

If we were doing all this, then like Aidan we would be turning people to the gospel and to the person of Jesus. That is what Evangelism and being a shepherd means: to be true witnesses to the Gospel, the story of Jesus.

In the Bible, story plays an amazing part in communicating God’s message to his people. It is Abraham’s story that teaches us about faith, but it is Jacob’s story that teaches us about the power of love, Joseph’s story teaches us about courage and what it means to be chosen by God. David’s story tells us that even if we are flawed, God can still use us.

In St Aidan we find a story of gentle persuasion in the midst of fierce cruelty, war, and death.

Little Aidan begins his story today surrounded by the family that love him. What will he grow to be? Only time will tell. But it will be the love and faith of his family that will truly give him that start in life that he needs.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday let us pray that his story will always be a happy one.

This we ask through Christ our Lord.

Amen+