

# Keeping Company with the Saints

Once again, on Holy Island recently, we slipped into our usual pattern of attending Evensong in the parish church, also St. Mary's. This began many years ago when we felt we needed a spiritual anchor to our days, a time that was wholly for the Lord. So over the years it has proved to be.



When we first plucked up our courage to go to a service about which we knew absolutely nothing it was rather like travelling to a foreign land. We didn't know when to stand, sit, face the altar or kneel. The recitation of the psalms was even more daunting, as we kept forgetting the pauses. It certainly taught us to concentrate; one wandering thought and one of us came in

at the wrong place. As there were often only a few there, our mistakes and confusion were very obvious.

In addition, the church was freezing cold. We sat in heavy coats, with scarfs around our head and whipped off our warm gloves only for seconds if we were unable to turn a page with them on. Whereas on a spring evening it is a delightful walk through the village, in winter, when we are usually there, the East wind almost takes away the breath. In the early days there was no lighting around the church and the paths were uneven. Torches were a necessity to find the church porch and our way out through the churchyard. It certainly wasn't an easy option going to Evensong! Often we had to make a determined effort. Sitting cosily around a warm Aga instead, was a temptation!

What was it that kept us faithful? We sensed, as we went into the church that we were in the company of the saints. There was an atmosphere of holiness, a sense of peace, a thin place, as it is sometimes called today, where heaven and earth are very near. Perhaps, very near the spot where we were praying, gentle St Aidan had knelt in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. His life was one of simplicity, he loved the poor and sought to evangelise the ancient kingdom of Northumbria. He founded a community on Lindisfarne. Later, St Cuthbert became prior of the monastery there. His generosity, insight, and humility were acknowledged by all who knew him. It took the intervention of the King to persuade him to become a Bishop. He, at last, consented. No mention of "careers in the church", by these early saints! Our first vicar on Holy Island was David Adam (of book fame). Many a cold winter's evening we would walk back with him and stand for a short time outside the vicarage, as he talked to us of the saints. He explained that Feast Days were their birthdays in heaven. We learned to keep company with the saints, past and present.

Along came the next vicar, a Franciscan Brother. He too walked with the saints, primarily St Francis who, as a young man, had fallen in love with Lady Poverty. Although our conversations with this priest were mostly about Constitutions, as we had to write one at

the time, we could not fail to notice that on the coldest winter days he walked around in bare feet apart from his sandals. He was so generous to others that he had been known to give up his bed to someone who needed somewhere to sleep.

We are now up to our third vicar, lighting around the church, heating in it and wide tarmacked paths, but we are still keeping company with the saints. Some of their writings have been incorporated into the liturgy. Last time we were on Holy Island, in the Lent Evensong, we discovered this beautiful prayer from St Anselm of Canterbury:

“Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you;  
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.  
Often you weep over our sins and our pride,  
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement.  
You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds,  
in sickness you nurse us, and with pure milk you feed us.  
Jesus, by your dying we are born to new life,  
by your anguish and labour we come forth in joy.  
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness;  
through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.  
Your warmth gives life to the dead,  
your touch makes sinners righteous.  
Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us,  
in your love and tenderness remake us.  
In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness,  
for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us.”