St. Hilda – the princess and the prioress

St. Hilda is one of our great northern saints who changed the shape of the early church in our part of the world. She was a niece of Edwin, King of Northumbria, who was responsible for bringing the faith to the north country. But more than being a wealthy woman, she was ahead of her time in founding a religious community for men and women. She did this at Whitby sometime around 640. A very remarkable woman.

I'll tell you a bit about her.

Her father was king of a small area of the West Riding, but when she was 2 he was killed in a battle at Sherburn in Elmet. She was taken in by her uncle King Edwin, who ruled over everything from the Humber to the Scottish border.

He became a Christian and was baptised in 625 with his whole household in York Minster. It was built of wood especially for the occasion. So Hilda became a teenage Christian., and a very wealthy one at that. Even so, she decided to become a nun and at the same time run her estates, farms, forests, etc. and care for her employees.

A considerable task for a young woman. But it was why she was later asked to build a new monastery for men and women. It was somewhere on the south cliff at Whitby where you can now see the remains of the abbey church.

What I want to show you is how she managed her working life and her religious life. A woman centuries ahead of her time, she was an inspiration in the secular world and the world of the sacred. How did she do it?  The Venerable Bede, who wrote a history of the English church and people just after Hilda's time, asked the same question.

**How did she manage to juggle two big tasks successfully? A princess and a prioress.**

Bede decided she was very good at taking stock. Keeping an eye on all those who worked for her on her estates, and those whose lived with her in her monastery.

In the fields, in the forests, and on the farms, she knew everyone. She was interested in their families, their health, and their homes. She encouraged the young ones. For example, a young herdsman called Caedmon had the gift of verse writing and singing. With her guidance, he became famous as an early English poet.  She took time, took interest in people and weighed up their gifts and skills. Taking stock, we'd say.

It was the same with her monastery. It consisted of small houses, each with two or three people. It was a mixed community but the men and women lived in separate houses. They kept a rule of life which Hilda adapted from Celtic monasteries. They ate and prayed and worked together. Each day was divided into parts for domestic work, Bible reading and study, worship, and growing their own food. The whole enterprise was designed to create a peaceful and joyful community.

Bede tells us that whether as wealthy princess looking after her estates, or as humble Abbess in her religious community, Hilda was a mother to all. Loving everyone.

She had that mothering instinct which was always taking stock of her family and all their concerns. Always available, she was widely consulted. It is due to her wisdom and guidance that the Christian traditions of her day agreed to keep Easter on the same day every year.

Let us not think of stocktaking as a chore. Maybe we should practise it too in the way of St. Hilda of Whitby.

Our congregation has lots of gifts and skills. Tell me if you want to help in any way. Meanwhile, I would like to say a big "thank-you" to those who do so much at present, for us all.