**Parish of Tettenhall Wood: Sunday 29th March 2020**

**Celtic Saint of the Week: Hilda of Whitby**

*St Hilda (or Hilde) was one of the great leaders of the Anglo-Saxon Church. She lived from 614 to 680, and was born into the royal house of Northumbria. Baptised at the age of 12, she was an influential lay leader before learning the rules of monastic life under Aidan of Lindisfarne. She became abbess of Hartlepool, before founding the double monastery (ie for both men and women, but with a dividing wall) at Whitby, which under her guidance would become a great centre of learning. Her Christ-like qualities of peace, love, respect and devotion attracted kings and chieftains to seek her counsel, and she provided training for at least five future bishops. The respect in which she was held enabled her to host the Synod of Whitby, 664, reconciling Roman & Celtic strands of Christianity. Although many of the Irish bishops were angered by the outcome of the synod, Hilda maintained friendships on both sides. It’s reported her last words to her sisters at Whitby were: ‘Keep the peace of the Gospel with one another, and indeed with all the world.’ Her saint’s day is 19 November.*



Inspired by St Hilda, we pray:

**Wisdom on high,**

**help me to learn from the likes of Hilda:**

**to be reliable and to grow in prudence.**

**To study, work and pray hard,**

**but not too hard;**

**to treat every person with courtesy**

**and none with contempt;**

**to maintain resolute faith,**

**balanced judgment,**

**and outgoing friendships.**

**Amen**

Legend says that Hilda rid Whitby of snakes by throwing them from the Abbey cliffs. This may be a medieval explanation of all the spiral ammonite fossils found on the coastline.

**Sermon: John 11: 1-45 – *Glory in the Waiting***

Jesus received news that his friend was ill, but he stayed where he was. He did not go to help. I’m sure this was not out of worry over infection, but his ‘holy inaction’ strangely does connect with us today. For us the right thing to do goes against our human instincts as we are forced to avoid close contact with loved ones in difficult times. So, I hope we can get reassurance from Jesus’ decision to wait where he was for a period of time, and that this sickness would not end with death but with the sight of God’s glory.

It feels like the wrong time of year for raising of Lazarus. This Sunday is Passion Sunday; it’s near the end of Lent. We are about to commemorate Jesus’ journey to the cross, but today we hear of someone being rised from the dead. When I was choosing hymns for today (a list that now sadly will never be used) all the suggestions were for Easter hymns. It felt wrong, like we’d jumped ahead a couple of weeks and taken the triumph without the heart-ache. However, the seasons of the church should not obscure the fact that Christians are called to be ‘Easter people’ all of the time. Every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection of Christ. We need now at this time particularly to hold to our faith that our Lord Jesus Christ is the life-giver, for both this world and the next. His promise of seeing the glory of God, and his words, ‘I am the resurrection and the life,’ give us hope, today and every day.

Nevertheless, it is important we do not simply jump to the end of the story. Before resurrection there is crucifixion. Before Lazarus is raised, he has to die and be mourned. In this story, we see Jesus at his most human, grieving for his friend, sharing the grief of his friend’s sisters. The One who loves so much grieves so deeply. Greek scholars tell us the language used in verses 33 and 38 is of intense emotion. It’s grief that goes to the depths of his being and surfaces with an eruption of anguish. Jesus weeps. And all the time there are voices in his ear, ‘If only you had been here, you could have done something.’ It must have taken all his emotional strength to say, ‘Only believe, and you will see the glory of God.’ Some people have found such comments callous – and they would be callous if this were a dispassionate God explaining away human suffering. But God in Jesus feels all the pain, grief, emptiness and loss: the glory is that God feels the pain and redeems it; it’s not an escape valve. Hope in the glory of God will sustain Jesus through the trials he is about to face, as he returns to Jerusalem ready to be betrayed, arrested, abandoned, beaten, falsely accused, unjustly convicted and finally crucified.

We have not yet reached Holy Week when these events are commemorated. It’s still a time of waiting. So, let’s return to the beginning of the story. ‘A man named Lazarus was sick.’ Again, the Greek is interesting. ‘Sick’ here is an on-going condition, weakness or disability. Obviously by verse 3, when the sisters send the urgent message, it’s become an acute illness, but it does seem likely Lazarus was disabled. Certainly, it was unusual for two apparently unmarried sisters to be living with their brother, and the house to be labelled as theirs rather than his. Had they given over their lives to caring for him? We don’t know. But we do know Lazarus is the first individual in John’s Gospel to be called ‘friend’ of Jesus. The Twelve will only graduate to this status in chapter 15. If they were friends it suggests they enjoyed one another’s company, talking and joking together, encouraging and supporting one another. Friendship is mutual: it goes both ways, giving and receiving. Jesus and Lazarus enjoyed this sort of relationship. And for all that, Jesus did not rush off to help him in his hour of need. He waited, for the greater thing was that they all see the glory of God.

John’s Gospel makes clear the glory of God is not only to be found in Jesus’ resurrection but in Jesus’ obedience in going to death on the cross. So, in today’s story, it is not only found at the end when Lazarus extraordinarily walks out of his tomb. It’s seen on the way, in Thomas (otherwise known for his doubts) who makes one of the great pledges of discipleship in the Bible: ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’ It’s seen in Martha, who makes one of the most clearsighted statements of Jesus’ identity: ‘I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ It’s seen in Mary, who, somehow, through her tears, believes.

Today, we exist in a period of enforced waiting. Whilst some are working heroically for the good of all, for many all we can do is wait. Our lives are put on hold, our plans, intentions and aspirations stalled and uncertain. The question is, how can we wait well? How can we avoid frustration, fatalism, depression and loneliness? How can we wait expectantly but not impatiently? How do we keep hopeful of God’s glory? For myself, one of the things I keep having to learn is that hope is not something I can achieve. It is not to be found in the sum of the activities that I undertake. It is to be found in meeting the Christ for whom I think of myself as labouring. A fruitful life is not measured in hours I work or items I tick off a list, but in discovery of spiritual fruit that God is growing among us. Be expectant of seeing something of what God is doing – that is the way to nurture hope.

And friendship: friendship is so important. Right now, most friendship has to be at a distance. We’re discovering we don’t have to rush off to meet up with friends all the time. Friendships at a distance are precious, and may be deepened and nourished through safe means of the phone calls, emails and messages. By being restricted, we may come to value these friendships more. There is one friendship worth cultivating more than any other, that extraordinary friendship we are offered with Jesus Christ. It is truly worth taking every opportunity to tend your relationship with him – for to know him is to experience the glory of God.