Wulfstan of Worcester

I was travelling recently between two appointments, one in Chippenham and the other in Gloucester, and decided to break the journey in Malmesbury for a while. There I came across J H F Peile's translation (Llanerch Publishers, 1996) of *William of Malmesbury's Life of Saint Wulstan, Bishop of Worcester* written in 1143. It was a paperback, inexpensive, and looked interesting. In reviewing the book, I should like to share some thoughts which arose from my reading of it. Some thoughts: this is not a potted story of his life and work. All quotations are from the book. (Note: Wulfstan has lost his -f- in the title.)

From about 1015, when church and nation were exhausted from the disastrous reign of Ethelred the Unready, the English church had been in decline. Its offices were acquired as rewards for secular services. Bishops were busy with intrigue, greed and power-seeking. Spirituality and learning decayed, and, especially during the reign of Edward the Confessor, papal authority increased. The last English king, Harold, reigned for only nine months, and the threat of foreign invasion hung over the land throughout his reign. It was a period of political uncertainty within, and menace from without, followed by calamity.

Wulfstan passed his life during this period. He was born in Itchington, Warwickshire, around the year 1008. In 1062 he became Bishop of Worcester.

Wulfstan's Character

He acquired a reputation for saintliness even before his appointment as Bishop. When the choice fell upon him he protested loudly that he was unequal to such a calling, but yielded to people's persistence and to the requirement of obedience both to God and to the church authorities, and was duly consecrated by the Archbishop of York.

His practice was to eat and sleep sparingly, and to dress moderately, neither sumptuously nor making a pretended show of poverty, but tending to what is humble. Often he arranged for edifying books to be read at meal times, and he and his companions ate in silence. After the meal, he expounded what had been read "that he might impart heavenly food to them for whose bodily sustenance he had already made provision". Before old age changed his habit, he secretly drank only water. Only his servant was aware of this, whilst others at table were allowed to assume he was joining them in the costlier ale or mead.

One Easter he arranged a banquet and told his servants that he wished to dine with good men. So they invited a large number of wealthy personages. But on Easter Day, Wulfstan brought into the hall as many poor men as it could contain, called for the dinner, and sat down to eat among them. The steward complained that as bishop

Wulfstan should have been dining with a company of rich men, but he replied, “They are rich who know the will of God and can do it.” Of course, he often dined also with royalty and nobles.

He was concerned for constancy in prayer, both in himself and in others, but avoided making a show of his own piety. In the various houses where he lived, he had a small room set aside for his private devotions. There he would spend an hour in prayer and thought, but the passage to the room was known only to his servants; no-one else knew where he was.

His fame spread throughout England, and the greatest nobles sought his friendship. Earl (later King) Harold held him in high regard as a personal friend and counsellor.

He was approachable, ready to listen to requests and to give advice impartially and promptly to those who sought it. He did not favour the rich in hope of gifts, nor reject the poor. When he had to make a judgement, his habit was to lean on the side of mercy rather than severity. Neither would he turn aside from justice, either for fear of great men, or for their flattery.

People loved him, and a man like this is praised, but when he was praised for good deeds, he ascribed them to the grace of God. Such men are also envied and maligned. Yet, by maintaining a clear conscience, he was secure enough in himself and in the Lord to forgive their revilings.

Busy with the inward life of the soul, he was not lazy with outward duties. He was diligent in visiting his diocese, and oversaw the building of many churches, the main one being the cathedral itself.

It was his delight to reconcile people who were at variance with each other. One William the Bald had accidentally killed another man, and the dead man’s five brothers held on their enmity towards him and threatened death in revenge. They refused all terms or payment of any price, by William. Wulfstan pleaded with them to forgive William, but they resisted and still held to their intention of vengeance. In his bishop’s vestments, he fell at their feet, stretched himself on the ground, and renewed his pleas. “What rage indeed must have harassed them, that they could scorn the white hairs tumbled in the dust?” asks William of Malmesbury. Peace was a constant concern, delight and prize in Wulfstan’s thinking.

William of Malmesbury tells us that when time allowed, Wulfstan was always either praying or preaching. Lying, standing, walking, sitting, there was a psalm in his mouth and Christ in his heart.

His Preaching

Wulfstan was aware that the people were falling away for lack of preaching, so:

> *on every Sunday and on all great festivals he poured into their ears the counsels of salvation. You would have thought the words which he spoke sounded from the treasure of the evangelists and prophets, so did he thunder against sinners, and pour refreshing rain on the elect.*

On the occasion of the dedication of a church in Gloucester, he spent much of the day in preaching, and a multitude crowded around him "flowing in to the service of God like a mighty river".

At another church dedication at Ratcliffe, people came in throngs, and he "was long in preaching, as was his wont."

He planned his year's visits to places in his diocese, and as he went to each place he would exhort the people to faith and good works, when "such multitudes came about him as cannot be numbered."

There was a long-established practice at the time of Englishmen kidnapping their countrymen and selling them into slavery, and men would even sell women whom they had made pregnant. The captives were brought to the market at Bristol, sold, and shipped to the Danes in Ireland. This evil trade continued into the reign of William the Conqueror, and was not brought to an end till Wulfstan persuaded the men of Bristol to discontinue it. He would spend two or three months in the area, and come each Sunday to Bristol, "and by his preaching sow the good seed, which in due time sprang up and bore fruit". One is reminded of the present-day kidnapping of girls in Albania, for prostitution in wealthier countries including our own. May God raise up preachers in Albania!

Of course he wasn't without fault or error, and Romish practices had long infected our national church. He made prayer for the dead. He enforced celibacy for the clergy, pressing ministers to leave either their churches or their wives. Some who remained faithful to their wives, and were thus obliged to leave their churches, found other work, but others "wandered about till they starved". Even Wulfstan was a child of his time.

Held in high regard by the Conqueror, at the end of his reign in 1087 Wulfstan was the only remaining English bishop. All the others were foreign.

He died in 1095, allegedly while engaged in his daily ritual of washing of the feet of a dozen poor men, and was buried by Bishop Robert of Hereford:

> *Then, as if none had mourned before, began a great weeping and wailing. The whole multitude burst into lamentations which echoed and re-echoed in the vaulted*

roof. Their tears of sorrow, manifold and from the heart, bore witness that Wulfstan's death was the downfall of religion, a calamity to England. You could scarce tell which had greater cause for grief, clergy or people.

I recommend the book; but more earnestly, I recommend prayer that God will raise up a voice in England in our own day to call multitudes to worship Him in spirit and in truth.

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