

St. Frideswide's Day (October 19th)

Today is St. Frideswide's Day - the patron saint of the City and the University of Oxford. We don't know much about St. Frideswide. According to the histories, she was born towards the end of the seventh century, and her father was a Saxon whose name is Latinized as 'King Didanus of Oxford'. She was consecrated a virgin and became abbess of a nunnery which her father founded here. But the nearby King Algar of Leicester wanted to marry her, and to avoid him, she was transported miraculously to the village of Bampton, a few miles west of Oxford, or possibly to Binsey, which is the village over the far side of Port Meadow. Frideswide stayed in hiding for three years, keeping pigs to earn her living. Algar meanwhile tried to force his way into Oxford and was killed in the attempt.

Local legend has a slightly different version of this story. While she was still a princess, Algar tried to rape her and was struck blind by lightning as a punishment. Frideswide prayed to St. Margaret of Antioch, and a well sprung up at Binsey in answer to her prayers. She bathed Algar's eyes in the water and he got his sight back, but accepted that she was not for him. In the middle ages, the word for any healing fluid was 'treacle', and the Binsey Well appears in 'Alice in Wonderland' as the treacle well. Alice and her sisters would probably have known it because their governess came from Binsey.

Anyway, whichever version of the story you go for, Frideswide spent the rest of her life peacefully as a nun and died in either 727 or 735. By 1002 there was a monastery bearing her name on what became the site of Christ Church Cathedral. The monastery was suppressed by Cardinal Wolsey when he founded the College of Christ Church, and the monastery church became the base of the new cathedral. It isn't completely certain where Frideswide's remains are now, but the well at Binsey is still there. In the middle ages it was a major pilgrimage site, and one of the last famous couples to visit it were King Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon, praying for a son.

There's something special about local saints. We usually don't know much about them, and local churches often make far more fuss of them than outsiders think is really reasonable. (The local saint up the road at Dorchester Abbey, is a Roman missionary called Birinus who would have been about old enough to be Frideswide's grandfather, except that he came from the other side of Europe.

A friend of mine went there recently to hear her marriage banns read, and came out saying, 'They kept on talking about St. Birinus. As if he was important!) I think local saints are important. They may not be spectacular - not everywhere is Avila or Assisi - but they're ours; they belong to us, like family. And like family, you get who you get, and you learn to appreciate them by living with them. Which is a great thing, because even people we don't warm to instantly can reveal great qualities when we live with them for a long time, and we can come to respect and love them all the more because they're not superficially appealing.

It takes a bit of living with Frideswide to appreciate her, and a bit of imagination too. I imagine her, growing up in a privileged environment, finding that her comfortable life didn't seem quite right. Realizing that there's more to life than making a good marriage, and the meaning of life can't be measured in jewellery and livestock. Looking out of her small window and wondering about the lives of the people outside. Were there terrible rows with her parents, or were they pleased to save a bit on her

dowry, or proud of having a daughter who wanted to give her life to God? Whatever happened, Frideswide was in love with something her world couldn't give her, and when the day came, she walked away without regret.

Being a princess, she won't have been seduced by all that imagery of God as King, by the power and the glory. She went to make life in a small plain nunnery, trusting that the God who made everything would forgive her for not wanting most of it. She made a home for other women - noblewomen and their servants maybe, maybe women of the town, widows, prostitutes, orphans. They will have spent most of their time on routine practical jobs. Growing onions and making cloth, bringing green fruit and good intentions to ripeness, looking deeply into their own and other people's hearts, praying, welcoming travellers with a good meal. No doubt they forgot most of what they left behind them, especially the manners, the social accomplishments, the fancy needlework, the Latin.

But they learned the meaning of the word love more thoroughly than most of us will ever know anything. We don't know most of their names, but in the regular patterns of their days they walked holiness into the earth of Oxford. We don't have the instruments to measure the effects of their life and work on the people around them, but if we could, they might still be spreading outwards among us. Small saints remind us of the importance of unimportant lives. They tell us that holy lives are being lived all around us, often invisible from a distance, directly affecting only a few people, but indirectly many more. Some of them become local celebrities, and now and again they make it into the histories. Many more go unnoticed at the time or are forgotten soon after they die.

If you go now to the places where Frideswide lived and worked, hardly anything commemorates her. The cathedral has overbuilt her nunnery church with far grander architecture and more famous saints. There is a side chapel, with a very bare shrine and a rather confusing window with scenes from her life, but there is nothing to tell you who she was or why her shrine is there. The parish church at Bampton is a large ornate one, continuously elaborated between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries. Just one corner of it is Saxon, and maybe a church was built here originally because of Frideswide. But nothing in the church says so, and the only hint of her is a picture in a side window of a side chapel, where she appears holding a bunch of lilies for virginity, and standing in front of a pig. Only at Binsey does a helpful pamphlet tell you about her, and explains why the church is dedicated to St. Margaret of Antioch. And the well is clearly visible, because the Victorians tidied it up and gave it a stone inscription.

So her heyday has been and gone and Frideswide has her wish for obscurity again. In some ways she seems a strange patron saint for us in Oxford: a pig-keeping princess, an unimportant nun. But there are plenty of things about her which are worth remembering. She was unstoppable in her vocation, and in doing what she believed was right, and finding our vocation and working out what is right are two of the main aims of education. She was no snob (unlike many educated people), and she was a practical as well as a spiritual person (unlike many educated people). She was a woman who demanded and got respect in a man's world, which still can't be taken for granted today. But she also transformed even the life of her would-be rapist by having more compassion, more vision and more forgiveness than he deserved.

The Oxford she lived in was more than 500 years from having a university, but as the patron of both the university and the city, she reminds us that whatever we sometimes feel, we are one society; we belong together. And she had what we all need, in every

walk of life: a sense of priorities. In a place where most of us have our sights fixed on success - reputation - money - influence - she shows us how much a quiet life can achieve. How much deep and lasting goodness comes from ordinary activities out of the public eye. And that is good to know, since for all our ambitions, not one in a thousand of us will be remembered for our public lives, even a hundred years after our death. It doesn't matter.

Paradoxically, it may be the small private good things we do which have the most lasting effects. So I went to Frideswide's well yesterday afternoon and stood in a very quiet churchyard, and asked her blessing on us at the start of a busy year. For some of her sense of what really matters. For some of the peace she created at the heart of what even then was a busy town. For some of her unflashy holiness to settle on us as we walk the ground she walked. Amen

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