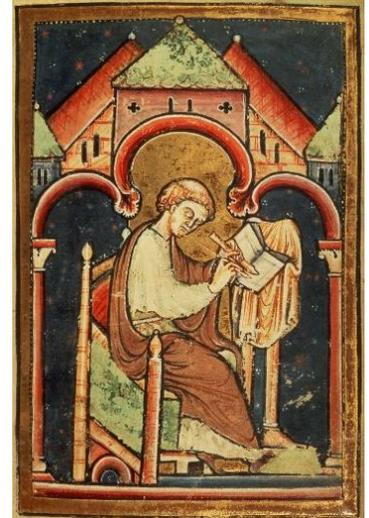


Faith Story: The Venerable Bede

The 8th century history-writing English monk Bede is a Venerable and a Saint and a Doctor of the Church, an impressive collection of titles and honorifics. His major work, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, remains a crucial source of information about the arrival and development of Christianity in Britain. And yet, we have very little personal information about him. The introductory 'Life of Bede' section in contemporary editions his *Ecclesiastical History* opens with the statement that "Few lives afford less material for the biographer than Bede's" and goes on to describe his life as "perhaps as wholly devoid of incident as any life could be."



I think if I had read that introduction before beginning this Faith Stories project, I might not have included Bede on the list, since my goal has been to present these Christian forbears as real, relatable people whose lives express their faith through their unique skills, circumstances, and personalities.

In Bede's case, since I did put him on the list and I do think he is a Christian worth knowing, we can get to know him more through his preserved work than through his individual experiences and quirks.

What we do know is that he was born in 672 or 673 on the lands of a monastery in Northumbria in England. At the age of seven, he was given to the monks there as an oblate. A few years later, he moved to a newer monastery which had been built nearby, and he stayed there -- at St. Paul Monastery at Jarrow -- for the rest of his life, leaving only for short and infrequent visits to nearby cities.

The small footprint of Bede's geographic experience is in contrast to a life-long intellectual adventure that ranged and roamed and soared through all the information and learning and collected wisdom he could acquire. As a boy he was instructed by several well-educated monks; in addition, St. Paul monastery had an extensive library which allowed him to become deeply versed in all the sciences of his time.

Bede was ordained as a deacon when he was 19 and as a priest when he was 30. While his primary work was his writing, he would have also been expected to fulfill the common monastic duties of priest, teacher, and member of a religious community. And his writing itself would have been labor-intensive. At that time and in his monastic context, he would have used hand-sharpened tools on coarse surfaces, with minimal artificial light available for working outside of daylight hours. He did not have the copyist assistants which he might have had at a larger monastery, and so Bede alone was responsible for both the extensive study and subsequent manuscript production for all his works on topics ranging from commentaries on the Bible to

observations of nature, music, and poetry to a text entitled *On the Reckoning of Time*, which provides instruction in the use of different calendars, the meaning of the Zodiac, and the calculation of Christian holy days such as Easter. That work remained a central feature of school curriculum throughout medieval Europe for centuries after Bede's death.

All of that is impressive, but Bede's most lasting legacy is his history of England, completed in 731 when he was 59 years old. Bede was the first historian to use the *Anno Domini* or A.D. system of dating from the birth of Jesus; that system is still in use today, although the language has, in some uses, changed from "*Anno Domini*" to "Common Era".

Divided into five books, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* begins in 55 BCE with the raids led by Julius Caesar. From that point, it records 800 years of events in Britain, encompassing political, military, and social life as well as covering the arrival in Britain of Christianity and rise of the church among the Anglo-Saxon tribes. Without Bede's thorough account, we would know little of the early centuries of Christianity in Britain, especially regarding the history of Celtic Christianity, early missions to the Continent, and the definitive Synod of Whitby at which the Celtic church submitted itself to Rome.

There are a number of legends but no reliable explanation for how he became known as the *Venerable* Bede. One such legend is that, when Bede's eyesight had become dim in his old age, he was persuaded by some "mockers" to preach, believing mistakenly that the people were assembled to hear him. As he ended his sermon with a solemn invocation of the Trinity, the angels responded "Amen, very venerable Bede", which I imagine left the mockers feeling sufficiently chastised.

At the age of 63, Bede died in his monk's cell while chanting his favorite prayer: *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As in the beginning, so now, and forever. Amen.*"

Works consulted:

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