

Dear Friend

Today we celebrate the life of King Oswald, who was one of the first Christian kings in England and who reigned in the kingdom of Northumbria from 634 until his death in 642. He was the son of King Ethelfrith of Northumbria, who died in 616. The kingdom was then seized by Ethelfrith's rival, Edwin, forcing Oswald to flee to Scotland. It was here that he was converted to Christianity by the monks of St Columba. Oswald spent some time at the monastery of Iona, which had been established by Columba in around 563, and when Edwin died in 633 Oswald returned to Northumbria to claim his crown.

This could only be accomplished by defeating the Welsh king, Cadwallon. Before the battle Oswald erected a wooden cross on the battlefield and ordered his soldiers to pray for victory. Victory was duly achieved and the field became known as Heavensfield. Having become king, Oswald was determined to make Northumbria Christian. He brought monks from Iona, and after a false start, Aidan was sent. With King Oswald as his interpreter Aidan brought the gospel to that part of England, and churches began to be planted. Oswald gifted the island of Lindisfarne to Aidan and his monks, and Holy Island, as it is known, is a place of pilgrimage to this day.

After eight years as king, Oswald was killed in battle by the pagan king of Mercia, Penda, who had Oswald's body sacrificially mutilated and sent to various parts of his kingdom. Oswald was 38 years old, and in his eight years of rule he had succeeded in uniting Northumbria politically and as a Christian kingdom, and he is recognised as one of England's foremost Anglo-Saxon Christian kings.

This is how the Ven. Bede summed up Oswald's life:

As soon as he became King, Oswald greatly wished that all the people whom he ruled should be imbued with the grace of the Christian faith, of which he had received such signal proof in his victory over the heathen.

*Bede: Ecclesiastical History, III.3*

In our day, we might not be quite so keen to invoke the Lord as a means of gaining victory in battle. How times have changed! There is, however, a strand within the Christian faith which recognises that there is struggle involved - even a battle - that takes place in our hearts and minds. This is a struggle that anyone who wants to take seriously God's commandments to love, and his call to each of us to be a holy people, will recognise. We are beset by competing demands (especially the one that begins "I want..."), by a world that is increasingly secular, and by a spiritual foe who requires resistance.

It is the most difficult thing to be a Christian, but whatever effort it takes, whatever struggles or conflicts are involved, it will have been worth it, as to gain the victory is to share in a battle that has already been fought and won by the Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul says, in him we are more than conquerors.

We are all involved in a struggle today against the Coronavirus; may we remain strong and steadfast in our determination to keep ourselves and others as safe as we can.

Sign outside Bethany Village Fellowship in the USA:



"Addicted to the Hokey Cokey, so I turned myself around!"

May our God, who is greater than all our struggles, help us to share in his victory.

With love and prayers

Simon