

Alcuin

In the Calendar of Common Worship there is an entry for 20 May which may well leave you somewhat mystified. It's the entry for 'Alcuin, Deacon, Abbot of Tours, 804'. Why is someone who was a deacon (not even a priest) and an abbot of a French monastery included in the Church of England Calendar? And what did he do that was special enough to qualify him for inclusion?

Despite ending his life in Tours, Alcuin was actually a Northumbrian of noble birth, raised and educated from an early age in the religious community in York. This was at the time when York, having been a bishopric since the seventh century, had only just been elevated to being the second archbishopric in England. Under the first Archbishop, Eberht, and Ælberht, Master of the School, York quickly became one of the leading centres of learning in Western Europe. Alcuin was a star pupil, accompanying Ælberht on scholarly visits to the continent and succeeding him as Master when, in 767, Eberht died and Ælberht became Archbishop. When, Ælberht died in 778, Alcuin was despatched to Rome to collect for Ælberht's successor the special vestment — the pallium — that was given by the Pope to every newly appointed archbishop. On his way back, he met with Charlemagne (later to become the first Holy Roman Emperor), who was beginning to build up his court as an international centre of learning. The meeting took place in 781 (such was the time-frame for choosing a new Archbishop of York, and then for Alcuin to travel to Rome and to get as far as Charlemagne's court on his return journey). Alcuin had not yet written the many books for which he would be known, but Charlemagne recognised his talents and invited him to join the body of outstanding scholars and intellectual leaders that he was drawing together. By 781 or 782 Alcuin had joined the court, where he remained until 794, when he was granted the abbacy of the major monastery of Tours. There, even though he was in semi-retirement and was increasingly infirm, he remained in close touch with Charlemagne by letter. From these and from some of the affectionate poems he wrote we get a lively picture of intimacy with the royal family and of friendship and intellectual exchange with fellow scholars.

Alcuin's contribution to the hugely influential renaissance of learning fostered by Charlemagne cannot be overstated. He wrote books, drafted statements of royal policy which promoted the intellectual reforms, took part in contemporary theological controversy, had a huge influence on raising the standards of accuracy in manuscript production, left his mark on the development of the liturgy (including the introduction of votive masses, the singing of the Creed during Mass, and the encouragement of the observance of All Saints' Day), compiled a lectionary and a collection of sermons aimed at raising standards across the church as a whole, and at Charlemagne's request produced an accurately amended text of the bible. During and after his abbacy, Tours became an important centre for the production of beautiful manuscript bibles. It was also thanks to Alcuin that the standard of ecclesiastical Latin was raised, both in how it was written and how it was spoken within the liturgy and as a shared language amongst scholars. Charlemagne's reforms give the lie to the idea that the early medieval period was 'The Dark Ages' (a term historians rightly no longer use). Alcuin, Charlemagne's right-hand man and described by a contemporary as 'a man most learned in every field', well deserves being celebrated.