Reflection on: Ethelflaeda of Romsey 21st October 2020 23 October

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We are no longer providing video resources every week but may continue to create these important seasons of the year. We have attached some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation.

If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate at 7.30pm on Wednesday in the physical space of the meditation room at Wisdom Centre. The tradition we meditate in is Centering Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction: On Friday 23rd October it the feast day of St Ethelflaeda of Romsey (Abbess from 1003), a medieval Benedictine Nun who is the patron of Romsey Abbey along with St. Mary. It has become a custom of our meditation group to remember the wisdom of local Holy women, and today we continue that tradition.

I would like to begin with a few verses from the book of Proverbs (3:13-18):

Blessed is the one who has found wisdom,
and the one who obtains understanding.
For her benefit is more profitable than silver,
and her gain is better than gold.
She is more precious than rubies,
and none of the things you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are very pleasant,
and all her paths are peaceful.
She is like a tree of life to those who grasp onto her,
and everyone who takes hold of her will be blessed.

As we sit here in Wisdom House (or imagine ourselves here if we are meditating at home). St Ethelflaeda was a religious woman with a linage from the late Anglo-Saxon Church; she was thought to be mitred and, if she was she would have had similar powers to a bishop. The Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity in the 7th and 8th Centuries and have a close relationship to the Celtic tradition, with both traditions flowering from Paganism. The outside Saxon Rood in the south side of the Abbey shows the Anglo-Saxon heritage.

Unlike in the Roman Church and in the eventual reformed church of England, women religious of Anglo-Saxon times held vital roles within monasticism, beginning with St. Hilda of Whitby in England. Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians, defended English shores against Viking invasion and established influential religious communities and Saint Brigid was believed to have had a status equivalent to an archbishop.

To understand the linage of St Ethelflaeda, we can look at St. Hilda (c. 614-680 CE). Hilda was born into a pagan, Anglo-Saxon family in the North East. Hilda's mother found a precious necklace and as she gazed at it attentively, it cast a blaze of light that lit up all of Britain. In recording this story. St Bede in his Biography of Hilda comments that 'this dream (of her mother's) was truly fulfilled in her daughter Hilda, whose life was a bright example, not only to herself, but to many who desired to live well'. Despite her Pagan upbringing, God did great things through Hilda. Hilda's own mission was one of the first fruits of a mission by Pope Gregory the Great (r. 590-604 CE). In 597 CE, Gregory the Great had sent Saint Augustine of Canterbury (d. c. 604 CE) to England on a mission to spread Christianity. After her conversion, Hilda established a small band of women under the Benedictine monastic rule in the North of England at Whitby. Thus, St. Hilda became the first Benedictine Abbess. St Bede, in his writings on Hilda attested to her reputation for intellectual brilliance and education in her Whitby community.

Following the Augustinian mission, it was though the facilitation of St Hilda that Celtic and Anglo-Saxon communities came to adopt the settled life and Rule, Romsey Abbey and an earlier community possibly under St. Boniface being one such foundation. Subsequently, the Synod of Whitby in 664 formalised the English Church under Rome.

Rome had its own Pagan background with veneration of the emperor, or emperor cult being one practice among others. Rome was patriarchal, yet because the Divine Feminine played an acknowledged role for the Celts and the Saxons, the early Church in England looked to religious women rather than men to provide spiritual role models and education. Moreover, the Celts had always believed in power beyond death, the Christian phenomenon of relic veneration was manifest in early Ireland and medieval England for healing, a tradition inherited from the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon world. The Christian Saxons and Celts also listened for the divine in their environment, seeking Christ at the heart of every moment, within ourselves, within one another, and within the body of the earth. With incarnational spirituality, women and sacred nature so prominent in early Christian England It is no wonder that early Christians had a maternal vision of God, earthy, yet transcendent — flowing with life, permeating all things, exuding a good and holy verdancy everywhere.

Like St. Hilda, St Ethelflaeda was thought to have special grace. At her birth she was thought to be a 'child of light' who is said to have had a light like 'a ray of glorious sun break over her head' at birth. (Liveing, 1912). Born to a noble family, after the death of her mother the young Elfleda (Ethelflaeda) was entrusted into the care of the Abbess Merwenna of Romsey to be educated. It is believed her relics along with Abbess Merwenna may be within the Chapel of St Ethelflaeda at the east window, this is a small chapel and a peaceful place to meditate.

The walls on the south side of Wisdom House sit on or near the foundations of the precinct of the Benedictine nunnery. The Benedictine nuns' dormitories where situated opposite the gateway to Wisdom House on the other side of the road named 'The Abbey.'

Although there is a 350 year gap between the dissolution of the Benedictine Nunnery in Romsey (1539) and the arrival of the Daughters of Wisdom from France in 1891, this location has been a living, changing stream of religious life and community for 1000 years. I like to believe that the seven circuit labyrinth built by the Daughters of Wisdom in the grounds of the convent, somehow provides a spiritual link to the earlier Anglo-Saxon/ Celtic heritage of this Ancient site. In this tradition, the number 'seven' was thought of as representing perfection or completeness – as in the seven days of creation across the firmament. To the

medieval mind, walking a seven-circuit labyrinth represented a life journey on Earth (here at the centre) guided by heaven.

As was customary in the Anglo-Saxon/ Celtic tradition, St Ethelflaeda has many miracles and fables attributed to her which are often thought of as legendary. According to the legends of St Ethelflaeda she made her way to the River Test every night, and after making the sign of the Cross in the water began bathing, naked chanting the psalms of David and saying prayers which she did 'in the fountain or in the bed of the running stream…for so long as time permitted.'

The running stream that St Ethelflaeda is said to have bathed in is possibly the one located under Wisdom House at the north end, or at the edge of the labyrinth. Whatever the location of this Holy site, we can be thankful for this peaceful corner of Romsey and for the continued ministry of women here.

Of course, we have no way of knowing how much truth is in the legend expect that the practice of reciting the psalms in running water was a popular Celtic practice. Legends of St. Patrick described him as a servant to 'the king of angels' Patrick was said to spend nights in pools singing psalms, resting on a flagstone during the day. In the Celtic tradition the bathing pools of saints became places of pilgrimage. It was believed that when the water passed over a sick person that they would become whole (slán).

One of Ethelflaeda's most popular miracles is told in Legends of Ethelflaeda no. 3: Ethelflaeda "delighted especially in exercising works of mercy towards the poor…having distributed money from the put aside in coffers for safe keeping to the poor, they became empty. When it became time to return the money none could be found. Knowing the money had been distributed for good cause, the Blessed Ethelflaeda directed her prayer to the Lord. The prayer ended, the coffers, previously empty, were found full of money, and the bailiff, having been called, the whole money was restored to him with great joy.

And what about our own time? Miracles do happen. Sr Gerard, a Daughter of Wisdom was cured of tuberculosis, shortly before the hour of her anticipated death. The miracle occurred at Abbey House in Romsey in 1927 and is attributed to the relic of St. Louis Marie de Montfort, the founder of the Daughters of Wisdom. Following the custom already described, the relic was given to Sr Gerard just before the hour of her death. The statue of Louis Marie in the grounds of Abbey House was given to the Daughters of Wisdom by Sr Gerard's father, to express his gratitude for her cure.

A Benedictine sister of our own time, Sister Macrina Wiederkehr, OSB (July 28, 1939-April 24, 2020) wrote the following poem which puts me in mind of the unchanging and overflowing nature of the labyrinth and the Anglo-Saxon/ Celtic traditions which shaped the early Benedictine communities of England.

Ever Flowing

O Ever Changing God
Protect us from congealing.
Plant deep in our hearts an intense desire
to be flexible, bendable
always open to your transforming breath,
ever flowing, flowing, flowing.
Until we flow into the sacred stream
of that Eternal Drink which is You.
Then pour us back into the world
and let the flowing begin
again and again and again.

Sr Macrina's poem set to music by Velma Frye is below

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIqEXCXeTU0&feature=emb_logo

Beginning Meditation: Before beginning our meditation, you may wish to adjust your posture, you may wish to pay particular attention to the rhythm of your breath, taking a calming deep breath in through your nose, and a slow breath out, letting go fully. Then repeat this a few times. If you have a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, perhaps noticing your how your word is in time with the breath.

Bell Sounds…25-minute meditations begins…Count down timer starts (this may be your own watch or meditation timer app)
Bell Sounds…Meditation ends

Post Meditation Poem: Hildegard of Bingen OSB, a near contemporary of St Ethelflaeda from Germany

O Spirit of Fire, O Guide, life in the life of all life, holy are you, enlivening all things. O Great Way that runs through all, from the heights, across the earth, and in the depths, you encompass and unify all. From you the clouds stream and the ether rises; from your stones precious water pours, springs well and birth waterways	and the earth sweats green with life. And eternally do you bring forth knowledge by the breath of wisdom. All praise to you, you who are the song of praise and the joy of life, you who are hope and the greatest treasure, bestowing the gift of Light

Closing prayer of Ethelflaeda from Romsey Abbey (replacing usual group closing prayer)

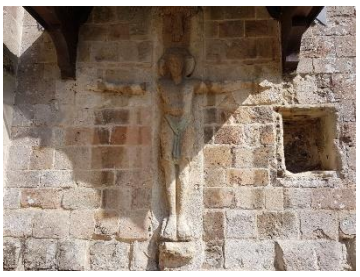
Almighty God, by whose grace the Abbess Ethelflaeda, kindled with the fire of your love, became a burning and a shining light in the Church: inflame us with the same spirit of discipline and love, that we may ever walk before you as children of light: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Resources:



Music:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWLkPJpmBBU

Image to left: A Banner Depicting St Ethelflaeda
Image to the right, the Saxon Rood





Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.