

Some Thoughts on the Life and Work of Ælfric, Abbot of Eynsham

By David Young

Ælfric wrote a letter to Sigward, a landowner living some twelve miles from Eynsham, saying:

When I was with you, you would fain have persuaded me to drink for pleasure more than was my custom. But know, beloved, that he who forces another to drink more than he can bear, shall answer for both, if any harm come thereof.

Reading some of his works, and reading about him, I have felt that he is a man with whom it would have been good to sit down and have a good long talk, even though the ale was unhopped in those days.

I have found some of the extracts from his writings very stirring, and they have vivified my feeling for:

- the preciousness of our redemption through the life, death and resurrection of Christ
- the strength and working in our lives of God's grace when we believe, and when we repent
- the provision of that same grace when we undertake good works
- the seriousness and the nearness of our Lord's return in glory to this world to receive His faithful ones to glory and to judge those who reject His Gospel.

It was for these reasons that I wanted to share with readers in Britain, Albania and Kosova¹ some of the strength, richness and blessing of his writings.

In the part of England south of the Humber, especially the Fens, the Severn Valley and south of the River Thames, the tenth century saw a revival of monastic life, which not only reformed the monasteries but also reached outside of them to renew English life more widely. Art and learning flourished, especially during the reign of King Edgar (959-975), and in the church the reform provided most of England's bishops down to the reign of Cnut. Thus, its blessed influence was felt in the royal court, in the witan, and from cathedral to parish level in the church.

After the death of Edgar a tragic reversal came over in England's fortunes. His son, Edward, was murdered in the third year of his reign, and was followed by the disastrous years of Ethelred the Unready (978-1016). Once again the Danes were raiding, and their assaults grew in brutality whilst the English faltered under incompetent leadership. Even though the last quarter of the tenth century was a dark time for England, religious, cultural and intellectual life continued to flower.

This revival or reform was a theological watershed. Among the manifestations of this is the fact that before it, no one produced an orderly set of commentaries on the scriptural passages

¹ I hope to produce a bilingual book of extracts (modern English and Albanian) from Ælfric's writings

appointed to be read in the churches. Ælfric did, and he was entirely without forerunners. If you read English sermons from before the reform, you find an uncritical acceptance of pseudepigraphical material, and reliance on wild, bizarre and fantastic legends. Ælfric abandoned this in his sermons. There is a very great difference in tone between the two periods.

Ælfric was born of middle class parents in Wessex in about 955 AD. Early in the 970s he went to the monastic school in Winchester; in those days the *only* schools were monastic. Winchester, primarily a training school for monks, was the intellectual centre of the reform movement. It was led by Abbot Æthelwold, who maintained a strong hand and exact discipline, but had a kindly and winning manner with children and youths and enjoyed teaching them.

Ælfric was a good pupil, became a monk himself, and in time was ordained to the priesthood. Eventually he may well have become the best educated man in England.

In 987 he moved to the monastery at Cerne Abbas, probably to promote the reform and to organise the teaching programme there. While there, he published two volumes of homilies, or sermons, in about 989 and 992. He tells us why:

The people have no books that teach in their own language the truth of God, except those that King Alfred translated. There are indeed many English books that teach error, and the unlearned in their simplicity esteem them great wisdom.

In 1005 he transferred as abbot to a new monastery at Eynsham, near Oxford. It is not known when he died. He had led a quiet life in his monasteries and as far as is known had played no part in the important secular events of his time. His commitment was to the service of God and the Christian teaching of his countrymen.

His most famous homily is on the Eucharist. It was republished with the addition of other passages from his writings on the same subject, in 1567, Archbishop Parker adding his signature with those of thirteen of his suffragans. “The memory of the righteous is a blessing” (Proverbs 10:7).

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The homilies published when he was at Cerne Abbas are based on the readings appointed for various days during the church year. They were written to be circulated and preached by local clergy in churches on those days. They might also be read in private devotion.

Ælfric always keeps in mind his hearers’ needs and abilities, and takes trouble to ensure that his style is clear and lively. In the Preface to the second volume, he says he wishes to “avoid garrulous verbosity and strange expressions, seeking rather with pure and plain words to be of use to my hearers by simple speech than to be praised for the composition of skilful discourse.” In other words, his message was important to him and he wanted to be *understood* by ordinary, uneducated worshippers.

Major themes include:

- God as Creator
- the Trinity
- the life and works of Christ
- man's sin
- man's redemption
- moral teaching
- the duty of priests and teachers to spread the word of God.

Ælfric also translated various parts of the Bible, producing more than any other Old English Bible translator. There was already a very good translation of the Gospels into English, which arose from the same monastic revival, and Ælfric concentrated on the Old Testament. No other European country produced so much of the Bible in its native tongue so early in history.

Ælfric's contemporary, Wulfstan, archbishop of York from 1002 to 1023, was another who played a significant though very different part in the revival of religious life of the period. Not primarily a theologian, he was a fiery preacher of righteousness. Convinced he was living in the last days, shortly before the appearance of the Antichrist and the personal return in glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, he urged priests and laymen alike to oppose false teachings and so to live that on the Last Day they might present themselves as righteous followers of Christian teaching. His most famous sermon is his "Address to the English" (*Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*), available today (2003) in translation in paperback and on the Internet.

Both Ælfric and Wulfstan strove for greater orthodoxy and clearer trains of thought than were found in the earlier homilies, published before the reform. They were concerned to provide systematic teaching. Ælfric attacked the leaning towards heresy in earlier English theology, which was closely associated with apocryphal and legendary writings. His homilies aim for clear, self-consistent teaching; meanwhile, Wulfstan sought to apply such teaching in his exhortations to repentance and righteousness.

Their writings for the instruction of the clergy give a lot of attention to the need for preaching in the churches. A frequent theme in Wulfstan's writings is that pastors should exhort their flocks by word and lead them by example; indeed, it has been called his favourite subject. Three letters of Ælfric have been preserved which deal with the theme of preaching, and they all refer to the preaching function of bishops and presbyters, whilst one of them, addressed to Wulfsig, Bishop of Sherborne, extends the role of preaching also to deacons and lectors. It says:

The priest is to relate the meaning of the Gospel in English to the people on Sundays and Mass days. And also concerning the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, as often as he can, for their inspiration, that they may know the faith and keep their religion. Let the teacher warn against what the prophet says, "Dumb hounds cannot bark." We ought to bark and preach to the laity lest for lack of instruction they be lost.

Three questions arise:

1. Did Ælfric succeed?
2. Was he a real Catholic?

3. What can we learn from his life and work?

1. *Did Ælfric succeed?*

No-one in the century after him produced another coherent set of commentaries on the appointed Bible readings for the year, neither in English nor in the native language of the any country in Europe. No one followed his leading example in this.

In fact neither Ælfric nor Wulfstan left any worthy successors and their effort to reform preaching did fail to gain lasting general acceptance. During the 11th. century, Ælfric continued to be regarded as an authoritative figure, and his works were a standard component of libraries. But his principles and directives were not universally followed.

Neither did Ælfric and Wulfstan succeed in repressing the older tradition of bizarre and far-fetched legends. Rather, both trends continued into the 11th. century, and people failed to appreciate how different the two were.

It is written that King David “after he had served the counsel of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid with his fathers.” It was not long afterwards that division and idolatry followed. If Ælfric likewise served the counsel of God in his own generation, he will receive the welcome, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” Following generations must answer for themselves.

A further thought: Ælfric wrote towards the end of an era - not, as was thought at the time, the appearance of the Antichrist and the end of the world, but the end of England as he knew it, for the Norman conquest of 1066 soon led to the replacing of our native monarchy, nobility and leading churchmen. A new age began. Does not God often bless shortly before the end of an era? Wales saw its last revival in 1904, ten years before the First World War, with its slaughter of potential future church leaders, and its subsequent loss of faith in a good God. Albania saw the awakening in and around Korçë in the late 1930s, shortly before the Italian invasion and the rise of Communism. Last calls to repentance and belief: and none of us knows when his world and society will be overturned in some upheaval yet to come.

2. *Was he a real Catholic?*

He was certainly committed to his Church. He begins his Preface to his homilies with the words *Ic Ælfric munuc and mæssepreost*² and he was a man of his own day and age.

He often goes in for an allegorical or symbolical interpretation of scriptures, learned from the early Church Fathers.

The “Vision of Drihthelm” which he uses in Sermon XXIII of Volume 2 is an example of a popular mediæval literary genre, namely a visit to the underworld, with its heavenly guide, its fiery vision, its subsequent transformation of the life of the person who has the vision.

When he writes on moral themes, he often promotes celibacy, another favourite theme of mediæval Catholicism - at a time when a large proportion of priests were married. And he refers often to the saints, and believed that they may intercede for us.

² I Ælfric, monk and mass-priest

So in a sense, Yes, he was a real Catholic - but a Catholic *of that time*. A considerable number of changes have been added to that faith since his day, among them the acceptance of the doctrine of transubstantiation, the withdrawal of the communion cup from the laity, the teaching that Peter is the rock on which the Church is built, and of course the Council of Trent.

There is no doubt in my mind Ælfric was a man called by grace, in whose soul that divine grace lit a fire of love for Christ and of urgent compassion for the lost. I wrote that it “would have been good to sit down and have a good long talk” with him: maybe I should look forward to that in the glory, for it is written that “many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”

3. *What can we learn from his life and work?*

He was a man of quiet determination and steady purpose. Even while the Danes were devastating the land, he went on with his writing. When hard times come, we should be mindful of our Lord’s words: “We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work.”

The study of his life and work, and of the reform movement in which he was so prominent a player, shows us some of the effects that can be produced in a primitive or uncultured society by the working of God’s grace and Spirit, as men are moved in spiritual experience and good works. Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven.”

Finally, if through Ælfric’s writings and example we can sense our need for a deeper love for God, worship of God as Creator of all things, the preciousness of our redemption, a morally consistent Christian life, the urgency to bring the Gospel to the lost and the importance of systematic teaching for the Lord’s people... if these things come to us more vividly and more weightily from his writings, then Yes indeed, we shall have learnt much that is vitally important for our walk in our own day from this valued servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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