

**Readings:** *Philippians 3: 7 – 14; Psalm 131; Luke 12: 32 – 37.*

Aelred was born in Hexham in 1110, the son of Eilaf, priest of Saint Andrew's. After his education in Durham, he became a member of the court of King David I of Scotland (son of St Margaret), where he carried out the duties of steward – well but not to his own happiness.

At twenty-four he abandoned court life and joined the newly founded Cistercian community of Rievaulx in North Yorkshire, where the abbot was William, formerly secretary to (Saint) Bernard. After his noviciate and profession as a monk, Aelred became novice master and in 1143 was sent to be abbot of the daughter house of Revesby. In 1147 he returned to Rievaulx as abbot and held that office until his death.

During his time as abbot the Rievaulx community grew to be the largest in England, with a hundred and fifty choir monks and about five hundred lay brothers and servants. The leadership of such a large community made great administrative demands on its abbot, with its extensive work of sheep rearing and with dependent houses in Scotland as well as England.

But the abbot is much more than an administrator: he is (as his title indicates) the father of his community. In this aspect of his role Aelred was outstanding. He cared affectionately for the monks in his care, and they responded with affection for him. He wrote to his sister that as he saw the brethren sitting together in the cloister "I could not find one whom I did not love and by whom I was not loved"

His surviving writings include a treatise *On Spiritual Friendship* which begins with him telling another (presumably a fellow monk): "Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst". This captures the essence of Aelred's understanding of true friendship: it is a loving bond between two friends which is bound up with their common friendship with Christ.

Aelred's health was fragile, and he spent much time in the monastery's infirmary, from which he continued to guide his brethren until his death on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1167.

Although he was never formally canonised, devotion to Aelred grew, and his tomb in Rievaulx became a centre of devotion. He was recognized as a saint by the Cistercian Order in 1476, with a feast in February or March. He is now commemorated liturgically on the anniversary of his death.