

Suggested Readings for Today: *Wisdom of Solomon 5: 15 – 20; Ps 144; John 6: 29 – 33.*

The Gospel had been preached in the Kingdom of Northumbria in the early 7th century, and its ruler, King Edwin baptized. But in AD 633 he was killed in battle, and his kingdom was divided. Two of his nephews, who had been in exile, succeeded him, but abandoned the Christian faith, and were in turn killed in battle. Their youngest brother, Oswald, had spent his exile in the community of Iona, where he had become a committed Christian. He now returned, *mustered an army small in numbers but strong in the faith of Christ, and, despite the vast forces of his pagan enemy, defeated them at the battle of Heavenfield.* Before this battle Oswald had erected a wooden cross and led his soldiers in prayer. The site of the battle became a place of pilgrimage, and a replica of the cross now stands near the church of Saint Oswald-in-Lee, near Hexham. Having taken back the kingdom, with his ‘capital’ at Bamborough, Oswald at once set about the restoration of the Christian religion throughout his kingdom, which stretched from the Humber to the Firth of Forth. He asked the monks of Iona to send him a bishop to lead this mission. They sent him the Irish abbot Aidan (*feast day 31st August*), and Oswald gave him the nearby island of Lindisfarne as his monastery and episcopal seat.

Bede tells us that, as Aidan was not fluent in the English language, Oswald acted as interpreter of the word of God to his subjects. Churches were built, and the king gave land and endowments for the establishment of monasteries. Oswald was recognized as overlord of much of Britain, but – so Bede writes – *although he reached such a height of power, Oswald was always wonderfully humble, kindly, and generous.* On one occasion, when he was about to dine, a crowd of needy people arrived asking for alms. *Oswald at once ordered his own food to be taken out to the poor, and the silver dish to be broken up and distributed among them.*

After eight years the king of Mercia attacked Northumbria: Oswald led his army westward, and on 5th August 642 fought a battle at a place called now called Oswestry – ‘Oswald’s Tree’.

His army was overwhelmed and he himself killed. His pagan opponent mutilated his body and put the pieces on stakes as a sacrifice to Woden. But followers rescued at least some of his body, including the head, which now rests with the body of St Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral.