

Suggested Readings for Today (as for S. Cecilia):

Hosea 2:16, 17, 21, 22; Ps. 45 (44); 11 – 17; Matthew: 25: 1 – 13.

Etheldreda was one of four daughters of Anna, king of the East Angles in the mid-7th century. Following the practice of political marriages, she was married at an early age, in about AD 652, to an Anglian nobleman, but remained a virgin. When he died shortly after the wedding she withdrew to the Isle of Ely – her dowry – to live a life of prayer. But after five years she was betrothed to the son of King Oswy of Northumbria, the fifteen-year-old Egwin, who was willing to allow her to remain a virgin. But when he grew older, he wished that they should live as husband and wife. Etheldreda said that, as she had vowed her virginity to Christ, she could not agree. They both appealed to Wilfrid, the Bishop of York, who decided that Etheldreda should enter a convent. She received the nun's veil from Wilfrid at Coldingham, but after a year returned to Ely, where she founded a double monastery of nuns and monks on the site of an old church. She became its abbess, and lived there for the remaining seven years of her life. The monastery was patronised by the Anglian royal family and became wealthy. Several of Etheldreda's sisters and nieces joined her, some of them succeeding her as abbess. But she lived an austere life, spending many hours in prayer, dressing in simple woollen clothes, and eating only one meal a day.

A plague attacked the monastery in AD 679, and several nuns died, among them Etheldreda. She was buried, as she had instructed, in a simple wooden coffin, but seventeen years later Sexburga, her sister and successor as abbess, translated her body, which had been found to be incorrupt, to a shrine in the church. Etheldreda became the most popular of the Anglo-Saxon women saints, many of them of royal blood, who contributed greatly to the life of the English Church.

The church was sacked by the Viking invaders in the ninth century, but in AD 970 it was restored by Bishop Ethelwold as a monastery for monks only. After the Norman conquest the present church was begun, and in AD 1109 it became the cathedral of a new diocese.

Throughout these many changes the shrine of Saint Etheldreda, surrounded by the tombs of many other saints, made Ely a centre of pilgrimage, as it is today – despite the destruction of the shrine under Henry VIII.