

## David Greenwood reflects

What makes a national saint?

The symbols of nationhood are often difficult to understand. Take St. George for example. It seems incongruous to have for our patron saint an obscure Roman soldier of Greek extraction from modern-day Turkey, sharing him with Ethiopia among others. Bemusement grows when one witnesses the display of his cross by the political right when one suspects they would certainly wish to exclude or deport St. George were they to come across him and his kind today.

It is not as if we don't have perfectly good homegrown saints. On Saturday (20 March) it was the feast day of St. Cuthbert, with Aidan and Wilfrid one of a trio of great 7<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Saxon saints. Thanks to the writings of Bede, we know considerably more about his life than we do about George's. Born c 634 in the modern Scottish Borders, he grew up at Melrose Abbey and it is said he was inspired to become a monk when one night, while still a boy and employed as a shepherd, he had a vision of the soul of Aidan being carried to heaven by angels, later hearing that Aidan had died that night.

Cuthbert's fame for piety quickly grew. He became abbot at Melrose at a young age and spent much time among the people, ministering to their spiritual needs, carrying out missionary journeys, preaching, and tending the sick, later moving to Lindisfarne and continuing his work there. He was an exemplary pastor, a man characterised by charm and generosity to the poor, and his reputation for gifts of healing and insight led many people to consult him. But in 676, he left his busy abbey to become a contemplative, a hermit on the island of Inner Farne. He gave himself up to a life of austerity and prayer, hardly ever receiving visitors except the abundant wildlife, in which he discerned the love and creativity of God. When he was begged to come out of his isolation to become a bishop, he did so with reluctance but shortly retired back to Farne where he died on 20 March 687.

After his death his body was buried at Lindisfarne until, with Viking raids growing in intensity, it was moved to Durham. And there his body rests, behind the high altar of the cathedral, a shrine of great significance and holiness.

Visit Durham today and the continued veneration of Cuthbert is clear and powerful. The pride with which the cathedral guides direct you to his tomb and to his relics (including a glorious gold and garnet pectoral cross nearly 1400 years old) is palpable. Cuthbert may be long dead but he still lives in the hearts of the people of the North-East. He has always been their patron saint.

And should you harbour any remaining doubts about his qualifications and present-day relevance, look at the accompanying picture. You may call them Eider Ducks but up North they are known as Cuddy's Ducks, after the saint. He fed them on Inner Farne and instituted special laws to protect the ducks and other seabirds nesting on the islands. They still breed in their thousands off the Northumberland coast. A conservationist, over a thousand years ahead of his time.

Time for St. George to retire? I give you St. Cuthbert, a patron saint for the ages.

