

In his famous book, *The Ecclesiastical History of England*, Bede tells us that Oswald prepared to meet his enemies Cadwallon and Penda in battle on a December night at a place which is now called Heavenfield. His small army was likely to be outnumbered and victory seemed impossible. But that night, Oswald had a vision of St Columba, the founder of Iona. Columba prophesied that Oswald would be king, and reminded him of God's words to Joshua at the river Jordan, "Be strong, and of good courage... for you will be the leader of these people as they occupy this land."

Before battle commenced, Oswald made a rough cross from two young trees and held it upright until soldiers were able to fill in the hole around it. Then he led his army in a prayer that God would bring victory and deliverance to his people. He also promised that if they survived, he would send for missionaries from Iona to bring the Christian faith to Northumbria.

Oswald's subsequent victory has become part of the region's folklore, commemorated by the name of that battlefield and the more permanent cross which now stands at Heavenfield. Many leaders would have regarded such a triumph as the high point of their career, advanced to the royal palace and quickly forgotten their promise to God. But Oswald remained faithful, and in due course St Aidan arrived in the new kingdom and made Lindisfarne the centre of his ministry.

Now it was time for Oswald to reveal a quality less frequently associated with kings, but even more vital to the spread of God's work. That quality was humility. As the sponsor and protector of Aidan, he could easily have imposed his own agenda on this new mission. Such a test came early, when Aidan declined Oswald's offer of resources at court in Bamburgh castle, and chose the remoter location of Lindisfarne. Not only did Oswald accept the monk's decision gracefully; he continued to spend many uncomfortable weeks on the road acting as Aidan's interpreter. His willingness to lay aside his kingly privileges and play second fiddle to a spiritual leader ensured that the Gospel spread quickly through the new kingdom and transformed many lives.

Within a few years, dark times returned to Northumbria. Oswald was slain in battle and his brother Oswin succeeded to the throne. Penda continued to wreak havoc with his marauding raids; on one famous occasion, Aidan watched him attack the royal fortress as he prayed on the Farne Islands, and it is written that his intercessions caused the wind to change direction and beat back the flames from the castle gates. But through it all, the light of Christianity continued to flourish and grow. Aidan is rightly remembered as the missionary who brought the good news to Northumbria, but he could not have succeeded without Oswald, the man who was brave enough to claim an earthly kingdom, yet obedient enough to play a humbler role in advancing a heavenly one.

Prayer from the liturgy for St Oswald's day (August 5th), written by the Northumbria Community

"I place into your hands, Lord,  
the choices that I face.  
Guard me from choosing  
the way perilous  
of which the end is heart-pain  
and the secret tear.  
May I feel your presence

at the heart of my desire,  
and so know it is for Your desire for me.  
Thus shall I prosper,  
thus see that my purpose is from You,  
thus have power to do the good which  
endures."

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