

Wednesday Evening Homily

The Feast of Alcuin

May 20, 2015

Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 39:1–9

Psalms 37:3–6, 32–33

Titus 2:1–3

Matthew 13:10–16

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“Their hearts have grown dull – their ears are hard of hearing – they have shut their eyes – so that they may not look with their eyes or listen with their ears. And understand with their heart.”

Perhaps that’s a good description of the state of Europe in the early Middle Ages – the 8th century – the time of Alcuin, the one we honor this evening.

Successive waves of invasions by Germanic peoples over several centuries had demolished the culture of the Roman Empire. The philosophy and history and literature of Rome had been destroyed or survived only in isolated monasteries, largely forgotten by the people whose very lives were precarious. The practice of reading and writing itself had been lost except for a very few.

In the 8th century, there occurred a rebirth of interest in finding and preserving the works and wisdom of the past. It’s called the Carolingian Renaissance after the emperor Charlemagne. Charlemagne sought the revival of the state and culture of Rome, and to do so, he recognized that those things must be restored.

Charlemagne recognized that knowledge – learning for all and not just a privileged few – was essential.

He called on Alcuin, an English Deacon already well-known for his writing and his teaching, to establish schools in the empire. Alcuin accepted the task. He established schools accessible to all in the cathedrals and monasteries. He established “scriptoria” writing centers where the surviving ancient writings were copied for greater availability. Much of what we know of Roman writing is due to his work.

Alcuin is said to have invented cursive script – what we used to call longhand writing – to facilitate copying those works. He worked with Charlemagne to simplify and standardize liturgy, preserving many ancient prayers.

In short, Alcuin was not a martyr to the cause – not a colorful figure – but one whose work we have in our hands this evening.

In His Holy Name.