Part 1

Northumbria is a rugged place. It is a mountainous and rocky area lying on the east coast of Britain, right at the border between England and Scotland. Arctic winds blow off the North Sea, making for harsh winters. It was an especially harsh place in the seventh century, a scene of almost constant warfare. Angles and Saxons from the European continent had invaded the British Isles and pushed north, battling and displacing the Britons, Scots and Picts who lived there. These Anglo-Saxons, whom we call English, then fell to fighting among themselves for control of the land they had conquered. There were many rival kingdoms, each comprising only a small part of what we now call England. One of these was Northumbria.

When King Ethelfrid died, his sons fled for their safety to the Isle of Iona off the west coast of Scotland while their uncle Edwin became king. One of these boys was Oswald, who learned about Christ from the monks of Iona and was baptized there. Following King Edwin’s death in 633, Oswald returned to Northumbria to claim the throne. He was successful, which he attributed to his faith in Christ. But most of his subjects were still pagans, and Oswald wanted someone to help him bring the Gospel to his people. So he sent to Iona, asking them to send him a bishop.

According to tradition, the first man to go to Northumbria in response to Oswald’s call was named Corman. After spending some time there, he returned to Iona, saying that he had been unable to achieve anything because the Northumbrians were an ungovernable people of obstinate and barbarous temperament. Bede reports that when the monks held a meeting to discuss the situation, Aidan said to Corman, “Brother, it seems to me that you were too severe on your ignorant hearers. You should have followed the practice of the Apostles, and begun by giving them the milk of simpler teaching, and gradually nourished them with the word of God until they were able to follow the loftier precepts of Christ.” As often happens to those who speak up in a meeting, Aidan was tapped for the job. He was immediately consecrated bishop and sent off to Oswald.

Today at this church that bears Aidan’s name, we try to follow his example. We embrace the idea that each person is on a different path to Christ, and we refuse to call people obstinate when they express doubts or hold an understanding that is different from ours. We believe that the word of God is nourishing and that faith comes through paying attention to the simple teaching of Christ.

Bede says that Aidan was a man of outstanding gentleness, holiness, and moderation, who used his priestly authority to check the proud and powerful, comfort the sick, and relieve and
protect the poor. In the coming weeks, we will hear more stories of the amazing deeds of this gentle man we are fortunate to call our patron.

Part 2

*Aidan’s Community*

When Bishop Aidan arrived in Northumbria, he asked King Oswald to give him the island of Lindisfarne for his home base. The island, now also called Holy Isle, lies about two miles offshore when the tide is high, but when the tide goes out, it is connected to the mainland by a sandy causeway. This was the perfect place for Aidan to build his community of Christians. Twice a day, it is an isolated retreat where they could pray and study scripture in peace, and twice a day it is connected to the rest of the land, allowing Aidan and his followers to go out into the countryside and spread the Gospel.

Aidan recruited young English people to come to Lindisfarne and learn about Christ, and he ordained many of them to holy orders. Other monks came from Ireland and Iona to help with the project. Many new churches were founded. The historian Bede tells us that Aidan “gave his clergy an inspiring example of self-discipline and continence, and the highest recommendation of his teaching to all was that he and his followers lived as they taught. He always travelled on foot, and whatever people he met on his walks, whether high or low, he stopped and spoke to them. If they were heathen, he urged them to be baptized, and if they were Christians, he strengthened their faith, and inspired them by word and deed to live a good life and be generous to others. All who walked with him, whether monks or lay folk, were required to meditate, that is, either to read the scriptures or to learn the psalms. If wealthy people did wrong, he never kept silent out of respect or fear, but corrected them outspokenly.”*

Among his followers and students, Aidan included women as well as men. He is reported to have received the vows of Heiu, the first woman to become a nun in Northumbria, and who went on to found a monastery. She was succeeded by Hilda, whom Aidan specifically sought out for the position, and who later became Abbess at Whitby where she ruled over both monks and nuns. Hilda’s reputation brought people from all over England to learn from her, and she is honored with her own day in the Episcopal Church calendar, November 18. (Aidan now has to share his day, August 31, with Cuthbert.)

Today at St. Aidan’s Church, our life has a rhythm like that of Lindisfarne, (although more of a weekly cycle than twice a day): we cherish our time together in community, worshiping and studying Christ’s message, and then we go out into the world to live the Gospel as we have been taught. We try to follow Aidan’s example of generosity to all, especially the poor, and treat all people with respect, not just the rich and powerful. We encourage all to grow in faith and accept responsibility for leadership in the community.

*Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English People, translated by Leo Sherley-Price.*
Part 3
Aidan and the Poor

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Aidan’s ministry was his unlimited generosity. He had no interest in material possessions, and he quickly gave away whatever he received to the first poor people who crossed his path. According to Bede, Aidan owned nothing except his church and some fields that belonged to it. (Of course, that didn’t mean that the church was his personal property; it was entrusted to him for God’s work.) He also used some of the money he was given to buy the freedom of people who had unjustly been sold into slavery. Bede calls him "the protector of the poor and the father of the wretched."

Aidan ate only what he needed to sustain life, and he fasted every Wednesday and Friday until three in the afternoon, except during the fifty days of Easter. When he was invited to eat with the king, he would excuse himself after eating only a little so that he could go read or sing psalms with the monks who accompanied him. He must have made quite an impression on King Oswald. On one occasion, as Oswald and Aidan were preparing to eat together, a servant announced that a number of poor people were outside asking for alms. Oswald immediately ordered the food distributed to the poor, and the silver dish it was on broken up and distributed as well, to Aidan’s heartfelt approval.

King Oswald had managed to unify two warring parts of Northumbria, but after he was killed in battle, the kingdom was divided again, and he was succeeded in one part by his brother Oswy and in the other by his distant cousin Oswin. King Oswin was a generous and humble man, and he and Aidan grew very close. He worried about Aidan going everywhere on foot, since some of these journeys were difficult or involved crossing rivers. So Oswin gave Aidan a fine horse to help him with his travels. Aidan didn’t have the horse for long. He was soon approached by a beggar, and Aidan gave him the horse, royal trappings and all. The king was not pleased. He demanded to know why Aidan had given away such a fine horse, which the king had selected for him personally; there were other horses that would have been more suitable for a beggar. Aidan replied, "Is this foal of a mare more valuable to you than a child of God?" The king took some time to think that over, but then knelt before Aidan and asked for his forgiveness, saying he would never again question Aidan’s generosity.

Today, the people of St. Aidan’s Church are inspired by Aidan’s example. We seek to care for those around us who are in need, feeding the hungry through our food pantry, and supporting the San Francisco Night Ministry, Safe House for women leaving prostitution, Sojourn Chaplaincy at General Hospital, and other ministries providing direct services to the
poor. For many years, we have committed 10% of our budget to those in need beyond our walls. We hope Aidan would be proud, but we suspect he would encourage us to do more; he gave away 100%.

### Part 4

#### The Flame Of Aidan

Several of the miracles attributed to Aidan demonstrate his power over fire.

King Penda, pagan ruler of the kingdom of Mercia in central Britain, led his army in numerous invasions of Northumbria. On one occasion, he reached the gates of Bamburgh, the royal city. Unable to breach the walls, Penda decided to burn the city down. He had his soldiers tear down the neighboring villages and carry all the wood and thatch to Bamburgh where it was piled against the walls. He then set fire to it. Meanwhile, Aidan was at Lindisfarne which has a view of Bamburgh nearly two miles away. It is said that when Aidan saw what was happening, he raised his hands and eyes to heaven and cried, “Lord, see what evil Penda does!” Immediately, the wind shifted, and the flames and smoke were blown away from the city and back upon Penda’s army, so that they retreated and refused to attack a city that appeared to be under divine protection.

When Aidan was dying, his followers erected a tent for him at the side of his church. As he departed this life on August 31, 651, he was leaning against a post that was part of the outside wall. A few years later, Penda was back. This time he burned down the town and church where Aidan had died. But the post Aidan had been leaning against was untouched by the fire. Another church was built using the same post. It too burned down, this time by accident. Again, Aidan’s post escaped the fire untouched even though, as Bede says, “the flames licked through the very holes of the pins that secured it to the building.” When the next church was built, the post was not used in the outer wall but was given a place of honor inside the church. It was said that people who took chips from the post, placed them in water, and drank the water, were cured of all sorts of ailments.

Drawing upon these stories, the founders of St. Aidan’s Church chose to adopt the flame as the symbol of Aidan and his church. The flame is also associated with the Holy Spirit from the “tongues of fire” that alighted on the apostles on Pentecost. The flame appears on the side of our building, on our stationery in various designs, and on the first processional banner made for St. Aidan’s. Our email newsletter is called the eFlame. As a sign of inclusion, we have always portrayed the Flame of St. Aidan in the colors of the rainbow, a practice that long predates the adoption of rainbow colors as a symbol of the LGBTQ community. We pray that the Flame of Aidan will always burn brightly on Diamond Heights in San Francisco.