



An Introduction to St Fursey

About 1380 years ago a group of Irish monks, with distinctive rather wild-looking hair styles, arrived in East Anglia. They were welcomed by the new Christian King, to work alongside the newly arrived Bishop from France, to proclaim the Christian Gospel in this part of England.

Their leader was a monk-priest, Fursey, the first Irish religious leader to work in England, and one of the great Irish missionaries to work in Europe. He had tremendous influence in western Christendom, both during his lifetime and in the centuries following. Yet in recent times, he seems to have slipped below the radar! Because of his place in 7th century Christianity, and his particular contribution to our area, the Fursey Pilgrims – for the past 15 years – have sought to encourage renewed interest in his life and times, coupled with a deeper understanding of the spirituality of his era. We instituted the now annual Fursey Lecture series, when we invite academics who have done work on some aspect of Fursey’s life and heritage, and these lectures are published for a wider readership. As part of building up a larger corpus of knowledge about Fursey, we also commissioned the first ever transcription and translation of the First Life of Fursey – *Transitus* - and later this year will be publishing the words and music of the recently discovered medieval “Office for Fursey”.

But who was Fursey? He was born in Ireland about 597, the year that Columba died on Iona, and Augustine arrived in Canterbury. While there is a strong cult and tradition in Co. Galway in the west of Ireland, it seems that his birthplace was more likely to have been in the east, either Co. Down or Co. Louth. Very early he showed an aptitude to study the Bible, and a desire to grow in the faith was matched by a monastic discipline of life; he founded his first monastery at Killursa. In his early twenties he received a series of visions that focused his life on the urgency of preaching the Good News of Christ. For the next decade he went the length and breadth of Ireland. His preaching was powerful, and he became increasingly popular. But this growing popularity disturbed him, for he wanted people to focus on Christ. So, with his brothers Foillan and Ultan, and some fellow monks, he went on a month long retreat to a small Irish island to seek guidance. The desire to become “a pilgrim for the love of God” grew ever stronger, with the result that the group left Ireland – never to return – and arrived in East Anglia.

Sigebert had just been recalled from his exile in France to be the new – and Christian – King of East Anglia, and arrived with a burning desire to share his new found faith with his new subjects. He welcomed Fursey and his companions warmly, and allowed them to settle at Cnobheresburgh, which has

traditionally been regarded as the Roman Fort at Burgh Castle near Great Yarmouth. At the same time he was welcoming Bishop Felix from the continent, allowing him to place his new see in Suffolk. It was a window of opportunity, for Sigebert was only king for a few years. All the indications are that Fursey and Felix worked harmoniously together, despite coming as they did from two different Christian traditions. It is significant that the millennium east window in the parish church at Alpheton (between Bury St Edmunds and Sudbury) shows Felix and Fursey side by side in friendship as they share a common purpose. The Fursey Pilgrims, drawn from virtually all the major Christian traditions in this country, have always regarded Fursey as our Father in the Faith for all of us. During one of his visions, Fursey was told “Go, announce the word of God”, and this injunction should be at the forefront of our living and loving as we seek to live in Christ, and for Christ to live in us, just as it was for Fursey.

Here in East Anglia we always like to ‘do different’! There are just a handful of medieval church dedications to Felix, and we have only discovered one so far to Fursey. And that is for the surprisingly large north transept chapel in the parish church of Aldeby on the Norfolk side of the Waveney.

Fursey was here for almost a decade in his evangelistic work. It is thought that Botolph (later Abbot of Iken) was a monk with him for a time. And he was almost certainly involved in the life of a succeeding king, Anna, and his family, who probably learnt more at the feet of Fursey. Eventually he made his brother Foillan Abbot, and spent time with his other brother Ultan in his Broadland hermitage. With the understanding that the foundations of Christianity in this region had now been laid, he left his companions to continue their work here, while he continued on his pilgrimage.

He went next to France, where he was well received by the king Clovis II, (his East Anglian-born wife Bathild), and his leading official Erchinoald. They gave him a grant of land to build a monastery at Lagny-sur-Marne, just east of Paris. The monastery continued for centuries, and the later church built on the site is still a place of worship today. The continuing evidence for Fursey’s journeys and work in northern France are everywhere. Churches in Picardy and the Somme area are dedicated to him, many Holy Wells survive, his name is on the maps, and relics of him are in the Treasury of Amiens cathedral. He died while travelling back to East Anglia to see his friends, and was buried in the town of Peronne, which has claimed him as their patron saint ever since. It was a joy to have their parish priest, Abbé Nicolas, preaching at a recent Pilgrimage at Burgh Castle.

Fursey was buried in a church specially built for him in Peronne. Four years later his still uncorrupt body was moved to a new shrine east of the high altar. Just outside Peronne his companions had founded an Abbey in his honour, which became a great centre for pilgrims, and the setting for an important scriptorium. It was there where one of the monks was to write the Life of Fursey, the *Transitus beati Fursei*. It was written to coincide with the translation of Fursey’s relics, and is one of the earliest ‘Life’ of a saint to be written. Many saints’ lives are written centuries after their time, but this is a contemporary ‘Life’ written only four years after his death by a brother monk. A monk who had known Fursey, prayed and worshipped with him, observed him, listened to him, seen his effect on others, had probably journeyed with him. It is a living testimony that tells us so much about Fursey, and upon which the Venerable Bede, less than 80 years later, was to draw as he wrote his ‘History of the English Church and People’.

The “Life of Fursey”, his *Transitus*, written so soon after his death, gives us a compelling picture of a holy humble man of God. It speaks of a strikingly handsome man who prayed much, a compassionate thoughtful person with whom it was easy to talk, a man both patient and discreet, clear in thoughts and words, someone who could see deeply into a situation, a man who lived love. Above everything he was a man with a burning lifelong desire to spread the Gospel of Christ, it was at the heart of all he was and did. To spend time with Jesus is at the heart of the life of the Christian; it was obviously at the heart of the life of Fursey – in prayer, in worship, in times of retreat. He recalls us also, as Celtic Christians saw so clearly, to the fact that life is to be lived as a pilgrim for God – a truth clearly expressed in the New Testament, but too often forgotten in the human longings for power and control that can hold back the life and development of the Christian Church.

Bede was quite obviously captivated by this holy man. He spoke of “how great a man Fursey was”, and recommended the ‘Life’, “for (the reader) will reap great benefit from it”. Bede went on to say how Fursey was “renowned for his words and doings, (and) outstanding in virtue”. And Bede continued: “inspired by the example of his goodness and the effectiveness of his teaching, many unbelievers were converted to Christ, and those who already believed were drawn to greater love and faith in him”.

I have left until last one of the key ingredients of Fursey’s life and faith. In his early 20’s he received a number of visions, “out-of-body” experiences, in which he met both angels and devils; times when it seemed as if he had died. The influence of these visions upon Fursey was great and he spoke of them so often, they take up about 80% of *Transitus*. Not only are they the earliest example of this type of Irish Christian literature, but are among the first major accounts of the journey of a soul in the other world to be written down in the early medieval period. Fursey has a pivotal role in the Western Church’s developing understanding on penance, the purgation of sin, and of the world to come. From the remarkable intensity and detail of his visions, let me highlight three aspects.

1. Taken up, accompanied by three angels, he has a vision of the heavenly hosts. He hears their singing, he recognizes words from Psalm 84, and is overwhelmed by the intensity and brightness of light that surrounds and fills them.
2. He is then given a vision of a dark valley with four fires burning in the air above it. These fires, says the angel, will engulf the world if left to burn. They are the fire of lies and falsehood; the fire of covetousness; the fire of discord; and the fire of cruelty; and sadly, they are fires that remain to this day.
3. Fursey is then a witness to a discussion between the angel and Satan about penitence and forgiveness. In one place the angel observes: “You do not know the hidden judgments of God; so long as repentance is hoped for, divine mercy attends mankind. . . . You do not know the depth of the mysteries of God”. The point is being made that penitence and forgiveness are possible after death. The idea of purgatory takes shape, to be developed by others in the years to come, and that we can take our part through our prayers for the departed and by offering the Eucharist. The question is left to us, as to how we understand the death of Jesus on the cross, and whether we can even begin to imagine the true nature of the love of God.

Finally, Fursey meets two departed Irish bishops he had known in his youth, and we are given another insight into the Communion of Saints. They have words of wisdom for Fursey, among which are

highlighted the work of every missionary and priest, words which should be integral in the training of every priest or minister:

Call the faithful to repentance.

Build them up in faith.

Make them strong through sharing in the Body and the Blood of the Eucharist.

They gave other words of advice: rejoice in creation; steward it faithfully; esteem nothing higher than love; remember that pride is the failure to learn humility; give alms to the poor, even when you are not asked; practice gentleness and patience; be joyful in hope of what the future will bring.

Fursey has also left us a special prayer, his *Lorica*, and we shall pray it during our service. It is a prayer that gathers up that sense of living in God's presence, in the communion of saints, and using our God-given senses as antennae into God's world, so that everything we are and have are given totally to the service of God. It opens by recalling the warmth of God's hug; and it ends with the prayer that there may be a home for God in our hearts, and that to our heavenly Father we are able to give 'our entire being'.

Here is a saint to enjoy, a saint for whom we need to give thanks to God, a saint to emulate, a saint to walk beside as a guide on our pilgrim path. Let the words of the anonymous monk, as he brings *Transitus* to a conclusion, instruct us all:

“To them that seek in faith, the merits of Fursey are bright with divine virtue; by the help of our Lord Jesu Christ, who with the Father and the Spirit lives and reigns unto the ages of ages.

Amen”

Revd Canon David Abraham
St John the Baptist, Felixstowe
28th April 2012
A Celebration of St Felix and St Fursey.