



Introduction

Lesson aims

RE:

- To consider what it means to give.
- To ask questions about materialism, personal comfort and wealth, relating a story to Jesus' warning about possessions.
- To analyse motivation in a key religious figure.
- (Extension) To research modern pilgrimages, write a prayer and research the faith practice of prayer and fasting.

Literacy:

- Compare an imaginative retelling of a story with its original (adapted) source material, asking what the second author has added, and why.
- To analyse the characterisation in a story.
- To write imaginatively from the point of view of a character in a story.
- To write some Anglo-Saxon riddles.

Citizenship:

- To consider empathy
- To experiment with their personal speaking and listening skills in action.
- To discuss generosity.

History:

- To explore the decisions of an early Christian saint in Anglo-Saxon England.
- To analyse (adapted) historical documents for clues about the past.

Geography:

- Locate places on a map, make observations, and draw conclusions about a locality taking into account terrain and scale.

Background information

Aidan (whose name means 'flame' in Gaelic) has been suggested as a better 'patron saint' than the mythical Saint George - and he certainly made a greater impact, transforming the ideological and political landscape of Anglo-Saxon England. His 'Celtic' mission won great respect for its emphasis on personal spirituality, education, law and compassion for the weak.

This Irish monk was invited to Northumbria by the victorious Christian King Oswald as a

replacement for a failed predecessor. He made his base on the island of Lindisfarne, later named 'Holy Island' – he didn't base himself at the royal palace at Bamburgh, possibly because he wanted his mission centre to maintain a separate identity.

Christianity arrived in these islands by two main routes: in the north, from Ireland and Scotland as the 'Celtic mission', and in the south-east, from Rome, through the work of Augustine. These two strands of Christianity differed in style and theology, and although the more authoritarian Roman model prevailed after the great Synod of Whitby in the year AD 664, some still say that the wrong team won!

Preparation

Most of the background information and lesson ideas are contained within the development section, although you will have to work out how best to make the material accessible for your own pupils. To have a clear understanding of the narrative, the pupils should read the story about Aidan in [Worksheet 1: Aidan and the gift horse](#) and the narrative of what actually happened in [Worksheet 2: Aidan and King Oswin](#).

For further background information, see *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Penguin Classics, 1990). The material here has been adapted from Bede's words (Book 3, Chapters 3, 5 and 14). It might be useful to display a map of northern England and Scotland showing the locations of Iona, 'Northumbria' (roughly, Northumberland and County Durham), Bamburgh and Holy Island, to show the key locations in this story and its background – see, for example <http://www.heorot.dk/anglosaxon-map.jpg>.

Development

For older pupils, explain that King Oswald of Northumbria asked the monks of Iona (where he'd stayed as a teenager) to send him someone to teach Christianity to his own people. The first man they sent was a monk called Cormac. He based himself in the royal castle at Bamburgh but he quickly became frustrated with his new 'pupils' and returned to Iona, claiming that trying to teach anything to the Northumbrians was a complete waste of time. Another monk (Aidan) then suggested that perhaps a little more 'gentleness' was needed. As a result, he was put in charge of a new team to be sent to Oswald's kingdom. As the 'supply teacher', Aidan had a different approach – he made his base on the island of Lindisfarne, not Bamburgh Castle. As his team constructed a new settlement (including a farm, a church and a school), he mastered the local language and spent a lot of time travelling around the north-east on foot, speaking and listening to the people. After some years, another Christian King came to the throne, named Oswin, which is where this story begins...

For younger pupils, simply explain that long ago in the time of the Anglo-Saxons, there was a Christian king in Northumbria who wanted his people to know about Jesus and the stories of the Bible. One day, he decided to give Aidan, his local bishop, a present...

Read/share the story about Aidan using the text from [Worksheet 1:Aidan and the gift horse](#). For younger pupils, you could turn this into a drama session in which different groups of children act out (or 'freeze-frame') the deeds and feelings of different characters in the story. (Remember that a good drama session should always start with warm-ups, possibly creating poses or movements associated with different actions or feelings or ideas covered in the story.)

After reading the story, get your pupils to discuss the following:

- What do you think King Oswin did when he heard what had happened to his present?

Share what actually happened with your pupils using the source material in [Worksheet 2: Aidan and King Oswin](#) (starting from the third paragraph.) This could be re-enacted in a drama session with pupils discussing in pairs what the king's response might be and then volunteers 'acting out' what the king might say - for example, 'Send Aidan to the dungeons.'

- What risks did Aidan take in challenging the King? (*Losing royal support for everything he was doing*)
- What risks did the King take, in finally agreeing with him? (*Losing face with his nobles*)

This story illustrates how Northumbria was changing: before this time, a king's word was law. But Aidan was saying that even kings sometimes get it wrong.

- What other questions might we have about this story?

Copy down and display the most interesting questions and ideas.

Cross-curricular links

1. All subjects

Recap on key information. Use [Worksheet 3](#) or [Worksheet 4: Aidan and the horse](#), depending on pupil age and ability.

2. Religious Education

a. Giving

Discuss what 'giving' takes place in this story, also suggesting answers beyond the literal - for example, respect, attention, dignity and so on. Together, list the pros and cons of Aidan either accepting or not accepting the gift of the horse and saddle.

- How might the gift have affected him?
- Have you ever been given a present that you didn't want? What happened?
- Have you ever given a gift that wasn't wanted? How did it feel?

Read the story of the rich fool that Jesus told in Luke 12:13-21.



- How does this relate to Aidan's story?

Get your group to copy out verse 15 and then get them to list the things that might make their life 'safe', illustrating their answers. (They could add what they think Aidan might say in a thought bubble.)

Extension: Read the story of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46.

- Which parts of this story would have been most important for Aidan - and why?

b. Thinking about prayer

Many athletes use mental 'routines' to help them prepare in the last few moments before a competition. Study the following ancient Celtic prayer of dedication that might have been said by Aidan on the island of Lindisfarne when he began his mission:

*God be in my head and in my thinking
God be in my eyes and in my seeing
God be in my mouth and in my speaking
God be in my heart and in my loving
God be in my hands and in each action
God be in my feet and on each journey
God be within me and without me
God be in the heart of friend and stranger
God be in the other who comes to me.*

Some prayers praise God, some confess problems, while others give thanks or ask for help.

- Which category does this prayer fall into?
- What effect might these words have for a believer?

Using a similar pattern, write a version of this prayer to use at the beginning of a school day- for example, 'God be in my pen'...

c. Children of God?

Your Majesty, are you saying that your horse, a child of a mare, is more dear to you than that child of God?

Aidan's pointed question to the king asked him to weigh up the relative value of an expensive horse and an apparently worthless beggar. The king's answer showed a change in his understanding, but is the life of a human being always worth more than an animal? Why? Why not? What about Aidan's argument that every person is a child of God and therefore special? Get your pupils to write about how the world might be different if everybody believed that idea and acted on it, choosing their own title.

d. Extension: Pilgrimage

Lindisfarne (Holy Island) is still a pilgrimage site. Every year, thousands of people make their way over the causeway to visit key sites such as the Priory, to stop, think and pray. Get pupils to research the reasons why people do this using websites such as <http://www.northerncross.co.uk/>.

e. Extension: Prayer and fasting

When Aidan and his team were given the island of Lindisfarne, it is said that Aidan decided to cast out and destroy any 'evil' that might live there, by first dedicating the island to God. With his helpers, he set up a large standing cross, then prayed and fasted by it for 40 days. (It was like a gardener having to take out all the weeds before putting in a fresh crop.) Set the task of researching the religious practice of 'fasting', and how different faiths and beliefs use it for prayer or meditation. Stress that this is not normally considered a healthy practice for growing children, because young bodies need a healthy diet to stay healthy and mentally alert. (The age at which different faiths and sects introduce the practice of fasting to young people can vary.) Any discussion of Health and Safety issues regarding 'not eating' should be taken in the light of your school's relevant policies.

3. Literacy

a. Reading comprehension

Compare the story in [Worksheet 1: Aidan and the gift horse](#) with the original (adapted) version written by Bede in [Worksheet 2: Aidan and King Oswin](#). Set the following tasks:

- List the main points of the plot in both versions. What events have been added to the story version (Worksheet 1)? Working in pairs, highlight common plot elements in both versions and then list those that have been added to the story version.
- Study the way Aidan's thoughts are described in the story version. Which phrases and sentences show his feelings best?
- Discuss: Why do you think the author of the story version made changes?
- Do you think it is fair to the original author to change a story like this? Why?

b. Creative writing

- Imagine that, after giving away the horse, Aidan wrote a letter (from Lindisfarne) to King Oswin (at Bamburgh) to explain what he had done but trying not to hurt his feelings. What reasons might he give to explain what he did? In what different ways might Oswin reply?
- Many historical stories are told from different points of view. Retell this story from the point of view of the horse... or the saddle!
- Write a diary entry for one of King Oswin's servants or nobles who was present at the meal when he had that argument with Aidan. What sorts of things do you think would have been happening? (Remember, some of them had just been out hunting.) What would they remember the most? Would they be pleased with King Oswin... or not? Why?
- The Anglo-Saxons used poetry to play with words and word pictures - for example, the

following riddle-poem describes 'life': *It is a bird that flies into your hall on a dark night, you don't know where it's been. or where it's going. For a few moments, there is light and colour - but before that, nothing, and after that - nothing.* Invent and illustrate some new riddle-poems on the lines of the following: What is a brother? What is a sister? What is a school? What is a lesson? What is the rain? What is a king? What is a cross? What is a question? More examples can be found at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/english/beowulf/riddle.htm>.

4. Citizenship

a. Empathy

Don't criticise a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins.

- Discuss: What does this Native American proverb have to say about this story?
- In groups or individually, set the task of finding a dictionary definition of 'empathy', copy it out and then create an acrostic poem about EMPATHY based on the initial letters of the word, where each letter marks the beginning of a new line. (Where does it feature in both stories?)

b. Speaking and listening skills

King Oswin showed how well he had been listening to Aidan, by quoting some of his words back at him ('children of God'). Discuss the meaning of the last sentence in the story: 'There are some things that you can only do, face to face.'

- What personal communication skills do we need to develop nowadays to ensure that we understand what *other* people are thinking, and *they* can understand what *we* are thinking?

Play a game in threes, where two people are simultaneously trying to explain about different things they've done to the third person. Discuss:

- Why is it difficult?
- How can we show someone that we are *really* listening? (By feeding back what they say to them at intervals, and making comments.)
- How can we explain ourselves clearly? (By thinking about what we want to say first, and keeping eye contact.)

Set an exercise where each child has to tell a personal story to someone else, who then has to explain it to someone else or the whole class. How accurate are they?

c. Generosity

Generosity is a key theme in this story - and it can appear in a wide range of forms. Working in pairs, ask the pupils to list the titles of as many stories, TV episodes and films as they can that include the theme of giving (for example, *The Miracle on 34th Street*) - do this in the form of a table

with the titles down the left-hand side of the page. Now get the pupils to explain their choice, using these headings across the top of the page:

- What is given away?
- To whom? Why?
- Which story do you think has the most interesting things to say about generosity?
- Is it always to do with giving away money or things?
- Are there other types of giving that we can offer to other people?
- And what's so good about being generous anyway?

Create a 'dialogue wall' in your classroom, where the pupils can use post-it notes (or similar) to put up their questions or thoughts on the theme of generosity - and possibly suggest some answers too.

5. History and Geography

Read the original account of Aidan's life in [Worksheet 5: How Aidan came to Lindisfarne](#). Aidan could have chosen to stay in the royal castle at Bamburgh and worked from there. Instead, he chose a base on an island - this was further away from the king's protection and also meant a lot of hard building work, creating a new settlement.

- In pairs, get your class to discuss why they think he did this.

Using Google Earth or an atlas, study a map of the Northumberland coast, locating Bamburgh and the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. Using a scale, try to work out how far they are from each other, by sea and by road.

- How long might it take to travel from one to the other by foot, by rowboat or on a horse?
- What effect would the rise and fall of the tide have on the road connecting the island to the mainland?

Make a simple copy of the map, showing the coastline and these two locations. On the map, list all the possible reasons for locating a new Christian mission centre at either Lindisfarne or Bamburgh Castle. Tick which of these reasons might be most important for Aidan, giving reasons, remembering what he was there to do.

6. Differentiation

a. SEN

The story in [Worksheet 1: Aidan and the gift horse](#) should be delivered orally or through the use of drama. Worksheet 1 is especially suitable for SEN and younger children, but it will need initial support to explain the task clearly, perhaps using speech or thought bubbles, with word lists on display.

b. More Able



Set the task of researching more of Aidan's background, using [Worksheet 5: How Aidan came to Lindisfarne](#). Summarise this story in (about) ten key points, then choose an extension activity from those listed above.

7. Plenary: Discussion points

- What impresses you the most about Aidan as a person?
- Does he have any qualities that you think people could adopt today?
- What would their effect be?
- How would your friends and neighbours react if you copied him?
- Would he make a better 'patron saint of England' than Saint George? Why?