

## Etheldreda, Abbess of Ely, c.678

Etheldreda, sometimes referred to as Audrey, was the daughter of Anna, a Christian King of the East Angles. Etheldreda was married at a young age to Tondberht, an earldorman of South Gyrwas, but having taken a vow of chastity she kept her virginity. Tondberht died three years into their marriage and Etheldreda withdrew to live on the Isle of Ely.

She stayed there for five years until in 660, and at the request of her family, she married Egrith, the 15-year-old son of King Oswy of Northumbria. Etheldreda still held to her vow of chastity. After twelve years of unconsummated marriage Egrith admitted failure in his lengthy campaign for marital normality and gave Etheldreda permission to become a nun. The marriage was annulled and Etheldreda moved into the monastery at Coldingham in 672.

A year later Etheldreda founded a 'double monastery' for both men and women at Ely in the Fens. This was no ordinary monastic community, having been formed out of much family wealth. Etheldreda lived a relatively ascetic life there until her death from the plague in 678. The present Ely Cathedral occupies the site of Etheldreda's monastery.

Etheldreda became one of the most popular female Anglo-Saxon saints partly because of the legend which said that after seventeen years after her death her body was said to be incorrupt and her grave-clothes fresh.  
*(Saints on Earth)*

The questions that sit with Abram in our First Reading today are in some ways similar to those of Etheldreda during her early years of being asked/forced to marry. Clearly her vision was on another way of life, so her question, as was Abrams was how do you live in hope of a future you cannot see as being possible?

Abram understood the direction he needed to go but it was how to get there. For him it was about descendants and the Patriarchal line, how could he fulfil Gods desire if he had no children to pass it on to. Etheldreda's was perversely the opposite, the last thing she wanted was children, but the vision was the same, a vision of service, of a life committed to God that would have an effect beyond her life. Abram believed the vision, he understood the narrative of the stars, and he was counted as righteous for believing that it would be so, but still the questions come, how will I know I will possess this land?

The ritual of sacrifice we read of is punctuated with the action of driving away the carrion birds until evening comes and a deep sleep takes him. Our narrative on the sheet jumps the dream and the voice of promise in the night. In our eagerness to get to the covenant we miss the news that the distance from where Abram is now to the fulfilment of the promise, is not just about a single lifetime, or a generational jump, the vision, the whispered promise is that it is half a millennia away.

Jessica Martin in her commentary on this piece writes:

*'The line between promise and fulfilment is winding and murky. It contains the sorrows of a people, springing from the line of this one man. Trust me through the good and the bad, says the Lord. Trust me that something is always more blessed than nothing, new birth rather than death. Trust me to find the way to the promised future even through the confusions of the present. Your goodness is not the point – humans fail, betray and forget. But my goodness can always be relied on. And Abram believed what the Lord showed him, and that was enough.'*

Down the centuries there have been countless numbers of faithful men and women who have encountered and seen the vision of their future as whispered by God and have believed... and that was enough to sustain them on whatever road lay ahead. For Etheldreda she had to see beyond the requirements and demands of others to her confessed promise to serve God in prayer with 'singleness of heart,' as our additional collect puts it.

For us, as we look forward, at times unsure of how we may get to where we understand God wants us to be, we pray that we may rest in the knowledge that 'Gods goodness can be relied upon...' Understanding that is not just the start point, but is also the middle and the end.

Philip