**Oswald, Ebba, Oswy and Eanfrith: how one refugee family changed our world**

‘Britain’ in 600AD was a Dark Age mix of warring tribes, invaders and settlers. After the Roman legions left (around 400AD), the remaining peoples had to defend themselves against both a series of raids and invasions- and each other. The North-East England kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira were settled by pagan Saxons from across the North Sea, and the ‘British’ (some of whom were Christian) retreated West and South. A fightback against the Saxons led to a series of battles- and in 616AD the Saxon Queen Acha of Bamburgh (whose husband had just been killed) either took or sent her children away to seek sanctuary with King Eochaid (‘Goldenhair’) of Dal Riata (West Scotland and Northern Ireland). He sent them on for safekeeping to the monastic islands of Iona (for the boys) and Kerrera (for the women).

Refugees face tough choices. What do you leave behind- and in your new home, what do pick up? At some point, these exiled young people decided to become Christian, following the faith of their hosts. Perhaps they were attracted by the idea of a god who knew what it was like to live as a refugee, to be hunted by implacable enemies, captured, tortured and murdered… and then ‘get better’. These personal conversions to the Christian faith had immense consequences for the future.

News arrived from North-East England: British warlords were attacking Saxon settlements in the North-East, probably aimed at driving the invaders and settlers back into the sea. Eanfrith (the eldest brother) returned in 633AD to seek a peace settlement with Prince Cadwallon of the British and Welsh- and was quickly murdered. His brother Oswald remained, serving in King Eochaid’s own warband and gaining a warrior’s reputation (‘Whiteblade’). In the following year, he assembled his own warband (Picts, Gaels and Saxons) who sailed across the Irish Sea to land in Carlisle. From there he marched East along Hadrian’s Wall, to encounter a massive British and Welsh force waiting in ambush at Heavenfield, near Hexham. Cadwallon had heard they were coming!

That night, Oswald had some kind of vision, and afterwards brought his warband together to kneel before an improvised wooden cross staked in the ground. He prayed to Jesus Christ for victory, then at first light, led a surprise attack on the larger force. After a long day’s battle, Prince Cadwallon was dead, and the victorious Oswald could now return to Bamburgh and establish a new Saxon Christian kingdom from 634AD. He was 30 years old. Ascribing his victory to God’s help, he requested that the monks on Iona send him someone to teach this new faith (and everything that came with it) to his own people.

The first teacher, Corman, came and tried his best but admitted defeat, claiming these Saxons had skulls ‘too thick for learning’. His replacement, Aidan, took a different approach, making his base not at Bamburgh castle, but on Lindisfarne island *(Why?)* and with Oswald’s help went on to create a whole new network of Christian communities across the North-East and beyond. The king (who was bi-lingual) sometimes served as Aidan’s interpreter when he was preaching.

Oswald was also noted for his generosity to the poor (dubbed ‘The Openhanded’). He died in battle a few years later, but had already provided a seed-bed for the Christian Gospel in the North-East. His sister Ebba refused to enter the political marriage-market for princesses, choosing instead a religious life that led to her establishing and leading new Christian communities in Coldingham, Beadnell and elsewhere. Oswy became king a few years after, winning battles like his brother and eventually chairing the Synod of Whitby which decided who controlled all these burgeoning Christian communities.

One refugee family, four ‘God with us’ spiritual journeys of varying success- but altogether, one story with an amazing impact.