

Feast of St Gilbert of Caithness

12th April 2021

In common with many of the Celtic Saints, there is not a great deal known about St Gilbert and some of that differs depending on the source. Born in the second half of the 12th Century, he is thought to have come originally from Moray, a member of the family of the Lords of Duffus, being referred to in some places as Gilbert *de Moravia* (of Moray). The family owned extensive lands in the north of Scotland and it is thought that William de Moravia, who became the first Earl of Sutherland in 1230, was a kinsman of Gilbert.

Gilbert served for many years as Archdeacon in the Diocese of Moray in the early part of the 13th Century. Sometime around the year 1223 (dates vary 1222-1227), he was appointed Bishop of Caithness by King Alexander II. At that time, the seat of the Bishopric (cathedra) was in Halkirk. However, it was a turbulent time and Gilbert's predecessor, Adam of Melrose, had been murdered at his palace there. One of Gilbert's first acts was to move the seat of the diocese from Halkirk in the north to Dornoch in the south where he owned land. He started work on building Dornoch Cathedral in 1224 and the first service was held there in 1239. Despite this move, Gilbert spent much of his episcopate serving his people in the more violent north and it was in his palace at Scrabster that he died in 1245, traditionally on 1st April. He was buried in Dornoch Cathedral and his relics were venerated until the Reformation.

The Cathedral at Dornoch, now in the care of the Church of Scotland, was a notable achievement for the early 13th Century. He also established hospices for the poor and was reputed to be a fine preacher who did much to bring peace and civilisation to his diocese. There is a legend that he also overcame a dragon or salamander that was terrorising the people of Sutherland!

A Collect for the Feast of St Gilbert:

Almighty God, the light of the faithful and shepherd of souls,
who set your servant Gilbert to be a Bishop in the Church,
to feed your sheep by the word of Christ
and to guide them by good example:
give us grace to keep the faith of the Church
and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen