

Alcuin of York

20th May 2020



How many well-known people can you name, I wonder, who have a significant association with York? Well, let's try a few of these for size. Dame Judi Dench, the actress, who plays 'M' in some of the James Bond movies. Yes, she was born in York. W H Auden, the poet, also born here. Guy Fawkes, infamously involved in the so-called Gunpowder Plot to blow up Parliament. Yes, he was born in York, too. Dick Turpin, the famous highwayman. No, he wasn't born in York, but he was hanged here! Anne Lister. Well, the name might not mean very much unless you saw the recent TV series, *Gentleman Jack*. In 1834, she and her lover, Ann Walker, took Communion together in Holy Trinity Church, Goodramgate, here in York, after which they considered themselves to be married. Quite something in those days. What about Constantine the Great, who was proclaimed Emperor here in York in 306? And then there's Alcuin. Mmm. You might have heard of him only if you're a bit of a nerd or a geek! After all, he is a bit niche. His influence on the course of European history, though, was immense.

Born in around 735, either in or near York, he entered the Cathedral School here, became a scholar and subsequently Master of the School. He gained a reputation for teaching not only that which was relevant to salvation, but also the classics and liberal arts. Later he became an adviser to Charles the Great, otherwise known as Charlemagne, whom Pope Leo III crowned as *Imperator Romanorum* – Emperor of the Romans – in St Peter's Basilica on Christmas Day in the year 800. Alcuin was highly influential in the cultural renaissance that took place under Charlemagne. The Emperor promoted learning and the increased provision of monastic schools, and during his reign scholarship, literature, art and architecture flourished. Alcuin's influence can be seen in the way Charlemagne encouraged both the classics and the liberal arts, as well as theology and spirituality. In many ways, we can see a thread going back to Alcuin in our own education system in this country, with its broad spectrum of what's studied. Alcuin eventually became Abbot of the monastery at Tours in France, where he died in 804, having also made significant contributions in the fields of poetry and liturgy, and who is celebrated by the Church today.

So much for the history. What relevance does he have for us today in our own lives? Above all else, perhaps, just one simple thing. Alcuin loved learning for its own sake and not primarily for what we can get out of it, other than the joy and delight of learning itself. Alcuin believed that we can find God and the wisdom of God



in creation, in everything that makes up our lives, whether what makes up those lives is consciously, deliberately or overtly associated with God or not. That's why he was so keen to promote the study of the classics and the liberal arts. Delighting in things for their own sake comes about as we practice giving attention to what we encounter, whether that's another person, a piece of music, the things of nature, prayer or anything else for that matter. Delighting in things for their own sake is, in the end, a matter of love, of valuing things in and of themselves.

So, whatever your day involves, why not pause, even if only for a minute or two, to pay attention, to delight in what's present, to value something or someone for their own sake, rather than for what we might get out of them. That might be just what connects us with Alcuin all these centuries later, and doing something for its own sake might be the best way of honouring him today.

A prayer of Alcuin

Eternal Light, shine into our hearts,
Eternal Goodness, deliver us from evil,
Eternal Power, be our support,
Eternal Wisdom, scatter the darkness of our ignorance,
Eternal Pity, have mercy upon us;
that with all our heart and mind and soul and strength
we may seek thy face and be brought by thine infinite mercy
to thy holy presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**