

# CUTHBERT & HILDA

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## CUTHBERT AND HILDA

*(There are two comfortable worn chairs in the centre of the stage or acting area. One has a newspaper on it, the other some knitting. Cuthbert and Hilda are standing motionless at either side. They are dressed in cloaks and resemble church statues. Gradually during the first few speeches the rigidity of their posture softens and they take off their cloaks, revealing the very ordinary, comfortable clothes of an elderly couple. Hilda in a tweed skirt and cardigan perhaps and Cuthbert in grey trousers and worn cardigan.)*

HILDA:           What do they see in us?

CUTHBERT:     What do they want from us?

HILDA:           Stability?

CUTHBERT:     Wisdom?

HILDA:           A story?

CUTHBERT:     Their story or ours?

HILDA:           Is there a difference?

CUTHBERT:     A journey?

HILDA:           A shape. A crust formed from the scarring of the conflict of the outer and the inner.

*(Cuthbert drops his cloak on the floor and goes to the chair with the newspaper, picks it up and sits down. Hilda stays on her feet, but the mood is now one of nostalgic chat)*

You know people thought I was content at Whitby. They saw me as a fortress. They leant on me and made me into something firm and solid.

But not a day passed in which I didn't long to be elsewhere. For years I yearned to join my sister, Herewith, in her convent in France.

There was a peach tree that grew beside her cell. Each year she wrote of the blossom and each year I promised her I'd be there for the harvest but never was.

One year she sent me some peach petals. They turned to golden dust  
in my fingers and I knew I'd never see her again.  
Or the peach tree.

She died that summer, giving thanks to God for her great fortune in  
having a sister who was so busy on such glorious work for the Lord  
here in Yorkshire. And so grateful for the pain and affliction that was  
taking her to her Saviour.

That is sanctity.

Real sanctity.

Unsung, unsought, unvalued, given and received, day by day.

My sister, loved by a hutchful of cloistered women, and buried beneath  
a wooden cross in the shade of a peach tree.

That is a sanctity that in all my bustling busy-ness I can only point a  
finger at in wonder.

CUTHBERT: Sanctity.  
Did they have any idea of the burning burden of those words?

*(Hilda takes up her knitting and sits.)*

HILDA: Take Caedmon's tale. That stupid, ugly great brute of a man, stinking of  
dung. They talked as if I knew the outcome, the key to unlock - unblock  
his heart. That all the hot and stinging words that I heaped on his  
shaggy head were a secret password to his soul, not simply the  
blundering ill-temper of a woman raging with frustration, venting her fury  
on an innocent rather than that po-faced papal messenger, Wilfred.

*(Turning to Cuthbert in exasperated self-justification.)*

It was an important meeting, for goodness sake!

Crucial to our future. All we could hear was the wretched sound of  
Caedmon's wheelbarrow, and the stench...

*(Imitating the sound of the squeaky wheel)* Ee-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee... as he  
went up the lane beside the Chapter House.

And there was Wilfred, fresh from Rome, his native wits beguiled by the  
dazzle of wine and sun, smirking behind his hanky.

You could see what was going through his mind;

*(Imitating Wilfred's voice.)* A pushover these pig-headed peasants,  
hanging onto their outlandish customs, half-pagan.

Authority. That's what they need.

Leadership and a strong structure from Rome.

A hierarchy. A firm pyramid. Control.

Order. Decency. Discipline.

*(Reverting to her own voice.)*

Oh - he didn't say it. Use those words. But it was all understood, behind all the bowing and the knotted Latin, and the slippery sanctimony.

Oh yes, we all knew what was going on.

Then "ee-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee," - can you be surprised that I lost my temper?

CUTHBERT: I'm not surprised at anything, knowing how irrational you women are, but it was still a deplorable outburst just to prove that you had your own petty authority.

HILDA: You don't understand!

I was frightened - not for me, for all of us.

*(Sagging defeat.)*

It was hopeless.

What I was trying to protect was...inexpressible.

I couldn't put it into words for that silly little Vatican flunky.

I couldn't tell him that it's not about ritual or liturgy...

But something deep in our bones.

It's not insubordination, it's our lifeblood.

And they wanted to destroy it.

And the most hopeless thing of all is that they had no idea of the destruction.

The patronising toad even thought he was helping us to sort out a muddle.