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No 12 1/2

CAEDMON

The story of Caedmon is a familiar one to many people, but as there are some to whom it may not be so familiar it is worth re-telling. Bede obviously realised the importance of it since he devotes a whole chapter to the subject. First he writes of the man and his history as something well known and beyond dispute – there is nothing legendary about it. *‘There was in the Monastery of this Abbess’,* writes Bede, *‘a certain brother particularly remarkable for the Grace of God, who was wont to make religious verses, so that whatever was interpreted to him out of scripture, he soon after put the same into poetical expressions of much sweetness and humility in English, which was his native language. By his verse the minds of many were often excited to despise the world, and to aspire to heaven’.* Caedmon was clearly one of the secular servants of the Monastery lands and he may have lived either in the village or in the Monastery enclosure. He seems to have had no gift or thought beyond the conscientious performance of his duties in caring for the livestock of the monastery. Moreover, he was of a quiet, reserved disposition which made him find little pleasure in the occasional social gatherings of his fellow servants, when ale flowed too freely and led to quarrels, and when the folk-singing which was usually part of the evening’s entertainment lapsed, as it often did, into pagan war songs which added to the general rowdiness, he used to slip silently away and his custom became an accepted bit of behaviour which was held *‘queer’* but not resented. This had happened on the memorable night of his life when a vivid dream came to him. A celestial visitor appeared to him in his sleep, and saluting him by his name said, *‘Caedmon sing some song to me’.* Caedmon gave the usual reply, *‘I cannot sing; for that was the reason why I left the entertainment’.* The stranger insisted, *‘However, you shall sing’.* *‘What shall I sing?’* rejoined he. *‘Sing the beginning of created beings’,* said the other. Hereupon he presently began to sing verses to the praise of God, which he had never heard the purport whereof was thus: *‘We are now to praise the Maker of the heavenly Kingdom, the power of the Creator and His Counsel, the deeds of the Father of glory’.* Dreams mostly dissolve on waking, but this one not only remained distinct and clear, but there remained also a feeling of the power so wonderfully granted. Even to a shy reserved nature such as Caedmon’s, such an experience could not be kept to one’s self. We may be sure he told a friend; the friend, duly impressed, told the reeve, the head of all village affairs, who, impressed in his turn, carried the tale to the Abbess Hild who promptly sent for Caedmon and bade him repeat what he had sung in his dream. He did so in simple obedience and Hild, with quick discernment, recognised the gift of God. So Caedmon became a lay brother in the Monastery and spent the happy remainder of his life making out of the truths of Scripture a new kind of Folk song for the people. Just before his death (supposedly AD 680), the erstwhile silent one was, says Bede, conversing pleasantly in a joyful manner with the others who were in the house (the Infirmary of the monastery) when suddenly he asked if the Blessed Eucharist were there. *‘What need of the Eucharist?’* they asked; *‘you are not likely to die since you talk so merrily with us as if you were in perfect health’.* *‘However’,* he said, *‘bring me the Eucharist’.* Having received it into his hand he asked whether they were all in charity with him; and they, replying that they were, asked him in turn whether he was in charity with them. He answered, *‘I am in charity, my children, with all the servants of God’.* Then as the night Office began in the Choir Church he signed himself, *‘with the sign of the Cross, laid his head on the pillow, and falling into a slumber, ended his life so in silence’.*

CAEDMON'S HYMN OF CREATION

NOW MVST WE PRAISE
THE GWARDIAN OF HEAVEN'S REALM
THE CREATOR'S MIGHT
AND HIS MIND'S THOVGHT
AND GLORIVS WORKS OF THE FATHER
HOW OF EVERY WONDER
HE THE LORD ETERNAL
LAID THE FOVNDATION.
HE SHAPED ERST
FOR THE SONS OF MEN
HEAVEN AS THEIR ROOF
HOLY CREATOR
THE MIDDLE WORLD HE
MANKIND'S GWARDIAN
ETERNAL LORD
AFTERWARDS PREPARED
THE EARTH FOR MEN
LORD ALMIGHTY.

C W KENNEDY'S TRANSLATION OF CAEDMON'S HYMN

PRAISE WE THE LORD
OF THE HEAVENLY KINGDOM
GOD'S POWER AND WISDOM
THE WORKS OF HIS HAND;
AS THE FATHER OF GLORY,
ETERNAL LORD,
WROUGHT THE BEGINNING
OFF ALL HIS WONDERS!
HOLY CREATOR!
WARDEN OF MEN!
FIRST, FOR A ROOF,
O'ER THE CHILDREN OF EARTH,
HE STABLISHED THE HEAVENS,
AND FOUNDED THE WORLD,
AND SPREAD THE DRY LAND
FOR THE LIVING TO DWELL IN.
LORD EVERLASTING!
ALMIGHTY GOD!