

193. Letter of Alcuin to Ethelred, king of Northumbria (793, after 8 June)

This letter and the next are among those called forth by the viking raid on Lindisfarne, which Alcuin saw as a sign of the divine wrath. In its account of portents before the raid it should be compared with No. 1, p. 181 and No. 3, p. 272. It is No. 16 in Dümmler, and in Haddan and Stubbs, III, 492-5. It was known to William of Malmesbury, who quotes part of it in his *De Gestis Regum*, ed. Stubbs, I, 73. It is translated by G. F. Browne, *Alcuin of York*, pp. 128-32 and by Allott, No. 12.

To the most beloved lord King Ethelred and all his chief men, Alcuin the humble deacon, sends greeting.

Mindful of your most sweet love, O men my brothers and fathers, also esteemed in Christ the Lord; desiring the divine mercy to conserve for us in long-lasting prosperity our land, which it once with its grace conferred on us with free generosity; I do not cease to warn you very often, my dearest fellow-soldiers, either with words, when present, if God should grant it, or by letters when absent, by the inspiration of the divine spirit, and by frequent iteration to pour forth to your ears, as we are citizens of the same country, the things known to belong to the welfare of an earthly kingdom and to the beatitude of an eternal kingdom; that the things often heard may be implanted in your minds for your good. For what is love in a friend, if it is silent on matters profitable to the friend? To what does a man owe fidelity, if not to his fatherland? To whom does he owe prosperity, if not to its citizens? We are fellow-citizens by a two-fold relationship: sons of one city in Christ, that is, of Mother Church, and natives of one country. Thus let not your kindness shrink from accepting benignly what my devotion is eager to offer for the welfare of our country. Do not think that I impute faults to you; but understand that I wish to avert penalties.

Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this most lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made. Behold, the church of St Cuthbert spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as a prey to pagan peoples. And where first, after the departure of St Paulinus from York, the Christian religion in our

¹ literally "of the Bealdhunings", i.e. "of the descendants, or dependants, of Bealdhun".

race took its rise, there misery and calamity have begun. Who does not fear this? Who does not lament this as if his country were captured? Foxes pillage the chosen vine, the heritage of the Lord has been given to a people not his own; and where there was the praise of God, are now the games of the Gentiles; the holy festivity has been turned to mourning.¹

Consider carefully, brothers, and examine diligently, lest perchance this unaccustomed and unheard-of evil was merited by some unheard-of evil practice. I do not say that formerly there were no sins of fornication among the people. But from the days of King Ælfwold fornications, adulteries and incest have poured over the land, so that these sins have been committed without any shame and even against the handmaids dedicated to God. What may I say about avarice, robbery, violent judgments? – when it is clearer than day how much these crimes have increased everywhere, and a despoiled people testifies to it. Whoever reads the Holy Scriptures and ponders ancient histories and considers the fortune of the world will find that for sins of this kind kings lost kingdoms and peoples their country; and while the strong unjustly seized the goods of others, they justly lost their own.

Truly signs of this misery preceded it, some through unaccustomed things, some through unwonted practices. What portends the bloody rain, which in the time of Lent in the church of St Peter, Prince of Apostles, in the city of York, which is the head of the whole kingdom, we saw fall menacingly on the north side from the summit of the roof, though the sky was serene? Can it not be expected that from the north there will come upon our nation retribution of blood, which can be seen to have started with this attack which has lately befallen the house of God?

Consider the dress, the way of wearing the hair, the luxurious habits of the princes and people. Look at your trimming of beard and hair, in which you have wished to resemble the pagans.² Are you not menaced by terror of them whose fashion you wished to follow? What also of the immoderate use of clothing beyond the needs of human nature, beyond the custom of our predecessors? The princes' superfluity is poverty for the people. Such customs once injured the people of God, and made it a reproach to the pagan races, as the prophet says: "Woe to you, who have sold the poor for a pair of shoes",³ that is, the souls of men for ornaments for the feet. Some labour under an enormity of clothes, others perish with cold; some are inundated with delicacies and feastings like Dives clothed in purple, and Lazarus dies of hunger at the gate.⁴ Where is brotherly love? Where the pity which we are admonished to have for the wretched? The satiety of the rich is the hunger of the poor. That saying of our Lord is to be feared: "For judgment without mercy to him that hath not done mercy."⁵ Also we read in the words of the blessed Peter: "The time is that judgment should begin at the house of God."⁶

Behold, judgment has begun, with great terror, at the house of God, in

¹ cf. Amos viii. 10

² cf. No. 232

³ cf. Amos ii. 6

⁴ cf. Luke xvi. 19ff.

⁵ James ii. 13

⁶ I Peter iv. 17

which rest such lights of the whole of Britain. What should be expected for other places, when the divine judgment has not spared this holy place? I do not think this sin is theirs alone who dwell in that place. Would that their correction would be the amendment of others, and that many would fear what a few have suffered, and each say in his heart, groaning and trembling: "If such great men and fathers so holy did not defend their habitation and the place of their repose, who will defend mine?" Defend your country by assiduous prayers to God, by acts of justice and mercy to men. Let your use of clothes and food be moderate. Nothing defends a country better than the equity and godliness of princes and the intercessions of the servants of God. Remember that Hezekiah, that just and pious king, procured from God by a single prayer that a hundred and eighty-five thousand of the enemy were destroyed by an angel in one night.¹ Likewise with profuse tears he averted from him death when it threatened him, and deserved of God that fifteen years were added to his life by this prayer.²

Have decent habits, pleasing to God and laudable to men. Be rulers of the people, not robbers; shepherds, not plunderers. You have received honours by God's gift; give heed to the keeping of his commands, that you may have him as a preserver whom you had as a benefactor. Obey the priests of God; for they have an account to make to God, how they admonish you; and you, how you obey them. Let one peace and love be between you; they as interceders for you, you as defenders of them. But, above all, have the love of God in your hearts, and show that love by keeping his commandments. Love him as a father, that he may defend you as sons. Whether you will or not, you will have him as a judge. Pay heed to good works, that he may be propitious to you. "For the fashion of this world passeth away";³ and all things are fleeting which are seen or possessed here. This alone from his labour can a man take with him, what he did in alms-giving and good works. We must all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ, and each must show all that he did, whether good or evil. Beware of the torments of hell, while they can be avoided; and acquire for yourselves the kingdom of God and eternal beatitude with Christ and his saints in eternal ages.

May God both make you happy in this earthly kingdom and grant to you an eternal country with his saints, O lords, my dearest fathers, brothers and sons.