

THE LIFE OF SAINT FRITHUSWITH

AS REMEMBERED BY THE PEOPLE OF RUMWOLDSTOW

Characters

NARRATOR, who reads the sections in *italics*

KING DIDA, king of Eynsham and father of Frithuswith

FRITHUSWITH / Friðuswīþ, holy woman and daughter of King Dida¹

JUTHWARA, nun, and friend of Frithuswith

BEGU, nun, and friend of Frithuswith

OSMUND, messenger of Prince Ælfgar

PRINCE ÆLFGAR, of Mercia

MYSTERIOUS STRANGER, an angel?

SWIFT AND NIMBLE: a boar

GREAT MOTHER: a sow

FIERCE SQUEAKER: a piglet

Note: the three pigs may be played by the same actors as Dida, Osmund and Ælfgar. The mysterious stranger can be played by any of those actors.

Here begins the life of the most holy Saint Frithuswith, whose courage, learning, and skill at healing earned her the admiration of all who knew her. She founded a great monastery in the town of Oxenford and was a staunch defender of the right of any woman to choose a life dedicated to the Lord.

¹ Dida of Eynsham (also called Didan or Didanius) was a 7th-century sub-king of the Mercian territory around Oxford. His daughter Frithuswith founded a monastery that was later incorporated into Christ Church, Oxford <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frithuswith>

During her childhood, Frithuswith's father Dida sent her to his settlement of Didcot where her mentor Ælfifu taught her to revere God and seek out a spiritual life. After the death of her mother Safrida, Frithuswith returned to Oxford to be with her father.

DIDA: (entering the room where Frithuswith and her two friends, Juthwara and Begu, are sitting; Frithuswith is holding a book from which she has been reading aloud) Wassail, daughter! How are you this fine day?

FRITHUSWITH: Hello Daddy, I'm in good health I thank you.

DIDA: You look more like your mother every day...she was as beautiful as you.

FRITHUSWITH: (blinking at him) I'm not sure I want to be beautiful...it seems like an awful nuisance and it only leads to getting married...(pauses thoughtfully) Daddy, do you think it's worth getting married?

DIDA: ...well...of course I loved your mother...she was a remarkable woman.

FRITHUSWITH: Do you think you'll get married again?

DIDA: Oh, I don't think so. The church provides great solace.

FRITHUSWITH: I know you've been praying with our priest Oswald...isn't he the one with the bushy beard?

DIDA: (blushes) Yes, he's very...comforting. Anyway, how snug you look here with your friends...what are you reading?

FRITHUSWITH: It's Hild of Streaton's monastic rule². It's awfully good! She says nuns should live in little households of two or three, and spend a lot of time with books, and gardening. And nuns don't have to get married.

BEGU: That's right. My aunt Begu - I was named for her - is one of Hild's nuns and she works in the scriptorium at Streaton. It sounds wonderfully well organised.

DIDA: don't you want to get married, Frithuswith? People mostly do. What about you, Juthwara? Let me see, isn't your mother the herb woman?

JUTHWARA: (smiles and quirks an eyebrow) Yes, Ma's a herb woman. Definitely not a witch.

² Hilda of Whitby was the founder and first abbess of the double monastery at Whitby (known to the Anglo-Saxons as Streaton) and host of the Synod of Whitby in 664 CE. wrote a monastic rule for women

DIDA: No indeed, everyone knows she's a very good Christian and all her charms only work because she prays to the saints. But wouldn't you like to get married to some strapping young lad?

JUTHWARA: Ma says no woman needs to marry if she's got a friend and a broomstick.

BEGU: Juthwara!

FRITHUSWITH: Broomstick? I suppose you mean that you can keep a house perfectly well swept without having a man cluttering up the place?

BEGU: (exchanging glances with Juthwara while Dida coughs embarrassedly) That's right Frithuswith dear - men can be awfully untidy.

FRITHUSWITH: (in a rush) Daddy, I've made up my mind. I want to be a nun and not get married. Please, can I found a monastery instead? I'm sure there ought to be one at Oxenford.

DIDA: Certainly, if you're sure that's what you want. I daresay Oswald would be very pleased. He can give mass to you all.

BEGU: (thoughtfully) That's a good idea; I think Oswald would be no bother to the nuns.

So Dida built a church at the gates of Oxenford and Frithuswith and her friends Juthwara and Begu founded a monastery there, vowing that they would live together as nuns for the rest of their lives. But Frithuswith was beautiful and wealthy, and word got around that there was a hot unmarried princess in Oxenford. And Prince Ælfgar, of Leicester or some other place in Mercia, sent his messenger Osmund to Dida asking for her hand in marriage.

(The scene is Dida's great hall. Dida is talking to Osmund; Frithuswith and her two friends are eavesdropping from a doorway behind them)

OSMUND: So that's settled. Prince Ælfgar will arrive at midsummer to marry your daughter.

DIDA: Hang on a minute, didn't I just tell you she's a nun?

OSMUND: Oh, you needn't worry about that. My lord won't mind that she's a god botherer, and it's all to the good that she hasn't been exposed to anything...unsuitable.

DIDA: No, I mean she doesn't want to get married!

OSMUND: What's that got to do with it? Really, this isn't bad mead. You can ship a few barrels up to Leicester as part of Ælfgifu's dowry.

DIDA: (grinding his teeth) Her name's Frithuswith.

OSMUND: Well she can change it can't she? Prince Ælfgar's last wife was called Ælfifu³, and it's a lot of bother to learn a new name.

FRITHUSWITH: (whispering) This is terrible! I can't marry anyone, and certainly not a man who is rude to Daddy and won't even learn my name!

BEGU: I know, but Ælfgar's a great lord. He might bring his huscarles and attack the town.

JUTHWARA: Ma says if you can't beat them, beat a swift retreat...

FRITHUSWITH: Good idea! Quick, let's slip out the back gate while they're arguing and run away.

BEGU: What, leave the monastery? But where can we go?

FRITHUSWITH: Have faith! The Lord will provide!

BEGU: (dubiously) I'm not sure about this. What about my books?

OSMUND: (loudly) Send for your daughter! Tell her the good news.

FRITHUSWITH: I won't marry that man! And I can't let Daddy start a war over me!

JUTHWARA: (hissing) Frithuswith's right! Let's get out of here!

So Frithuswith and her friends fled her father's hall and made their way to the shore of the River Tamyse.

BEGU: I don't like this...it's getting dark...can't we go back to the monastery?

FRITHUSWITH AND JUTHWARA: No!

JUTHWARA: (thoughtfully) What we need is a boat...

FRITHUSWITH: I shall pray! Oh saint Catherine! Saint Cecilia! Send us aid! (imploringly) Have faith sisters - but you must join me in prayer!

BEGU AND JUTHWARA: (gulping) Saint Catherine! Saint Cecilia! Help us!

FRITHUSWITH: Dear sisters, let us be calm, and trust in the Lord and his saints. We are as safe here as though we were in our own church. While we wait for the aid that is surely coming, let us sing together in praise of God's creation.

BEGU: (hearing a duck quack) What's that noise? Is it Osmund? Has he found us?

³ Many years later, in 1002 CE, Emma of Normandy was given the common Anglo-Saxon name Ælfifu when she married Æthelred the Unready. He had previously been married to Ælfifu of Northumbria; I have assumed that the habit of renaming wives goes back through history.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma_of_Normandy

JUTHWARA: No, it's only a duck.

FRITHUSWITH: Indeed, and ducks are our friends - remember the blessed babe Saint Rumwold⁴, and his faithful duck. I think we should sing the Ducks of the Lord.

BEGU: Ah, that's most fitting, as the words were written by no mortal man.

FRITHUSWITH: A-one, two, one two three four..

(The three nuns sing The Ducks of the Lord; see Appendix for the lyrics)

*As the nuns concluded their song, their fervent prayers were answered! A boat came into view,
rowed by a man of astonishing beauty.*

JUTHWARA: Wowser!

BEGU: Juthwara! Behave yourself!

FRITHUSWITH: Oh! Mysterious, astonishingly beautiful stranger, will you aid us?

MYSTERIOUS STRANGER: What ho ladies! What's the problem?

FRITHUSWITH: We need to flee Oxenford! Prince Ælfgar wants to marry me and we're all nuns and sworn to chastity! Please, take us to safety in your lovely boat!

MYSTERIOUS STRANGER: Well, I don't know that I've got time...I'm meeting some friends at the Dreaming Goat Inn, don't cha know?

JUTHWARA: I'm sure I can be more fun than your friends.

BEGU: (thoughtfully) He is awfully pretty...and you're a herb woman's daughter...

MYSTERIOUS STRANGER: (dubious) You're all sworn to chastity?

JUTHWARA: (coughs) I'm sworn not to *marry*.

MYSTERIOUS STRANGER: I dare say the lads won't mind if I'm a few hours late. Hop in!

FRITHUSWITH: Surely you are an angel sent to save us!

The mysterious stranger took Frithuswith and her companions down the Tamyse and set them ashore at the edge of a dense oak wood. They bade their boatman goodbye and crept into the cover of the trees, seeking shelter.

4 Rumwold, or Rumbold, was born and lived for three days in 662 CE.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rumbold_of_Buckingham. This drama takes place around the year 670 CE, so Saint Rumwold would have been a recent local sensation.

BEGU: (stumbling) What a horrible place! Trees everywhere!

JUTHWARA: There's nothing wrong with oak trees, you just need to watch your step.

BEGU: I'm so tired. Can't we rest?

FRITHUSWITH: Just a little further Begu. I'm sure the saints will look after us if we only persevere.

JUTHWARA: Hey, there's a hut ahead of us in that clearing.

FRITHUSWITH: So there is! I knew the Lord would provide.

BEGU: (approaching the hut) It looks abandoned...there's no fire...phew, what's that awful smell?

GREAT MOTHER: (emerging from the doorway of the hut) That's pretty rude! You don't smell so great yourself, human!

BEGU: Oh! What an enormous sow!

JUTHWARA: Please forgive my friend, she's not used to the woods.

FRITHUSWITH: How delightful! A holy pig! I am Frithuswith, daughter of Dida. How shall I call you, mistress pig?

GREAT MOTHER: I am Great Mother. (peers at Frithuswith) You seem more polite than the average human. Come closer and let me see you properly.

BEGU: Keep back, Frithuswith! She might bite!

FRITHUSWITH: Nonsense, the saints would not have guided us here if this good pig were not our friend.

JUTHWARA: Do you live here by yourself, Great Mother?

GREAT MOTHER: No, there are three of us. Come out you two, they seem harmless enough.

SWIFT AND NIMBLE: (appearing behind Great Mother, with Fierce Squeaker) Are you sure? Shouldn't we run away?

FIERCE SQUEAKER: You'd better not hurt my Mum!

FRITHUSWITH: Good gracious! Have you also fled from oppression?

GREAT MOTHER: You'd better believe it. Have you any idea what it's like being a sow in a village? You bear one piglet after another, and they're all taken for bacon.

SWIFT AND NIMBLE: And it's no better being a boar. I'd have been in the pot myself if I hadn't performed and - no offence Great Mother - I'm really not a ladies' man.

GREAT MOTHER: None taken, Swift and Nimble. I'm done with having children.

FIERCE SQUEAKER: I saw what happened to my brothers! I worked out how to open the pigsty and we made a run for it!

GREAT MOTHER: (affectionately) Fierce Squeaker, you are the bravest and smartest of all my piglets.

BEGU: I am so sorry. I never thought about the lives of swine before now.

FRITHUSWITH: We are companions in peril, and have been brought together by the power of the Lord. Sisters, let us make our home in this hut, if Great Mother and her friends will let us?

GREAT MOTHER: Why not? It seems we've got a lot in common.

FRITHUSWITH: (raising her hand) Praise be to the saints who brought us here!

At Frithuswith's words, a fountain sprang forth at her feet! Her companions realised that she was truly guided by the saints, and the three nuns made their home in the hut in the woods, living on herbs and acorns. But after three years living peacefully with the noble swine Great Mother, Swift and Nimble, and Fierce Squeaker, they grew to miss their home.

FRITHUSWITH: It's Daddy's birthday soon.

BEGU: I wonder if the other nuns have kept the scriptorium in good order? Have they kept the mice out of the book box?

JUTHWARA: The woods are awesome, but I miss Ma.

FRITHUSWITH: It's been three years. I'm sure Prince Ælfgar will have married someone else by now.

GREAT MOTHER: Ah, it's been delightful to have your company, but like calls to like. Perhaps it's time for you to return to the world of humans.

FRITHUSWITH: Yes, I feel the saints are calling us to Oxenford.

SWIFT AND NIMBLE: Take care, my dears, and remember us!

FIERCE SQUEAKER: And keep off the bacon!

FRITHUSWITH: Farewell, my friends!

Frithuswith and her friends made their way back to Oxenford and were joyously reunited with their families and the monastery. But Prince Ælfgar had not married, and he soon heard that Frithuswith had returned. King Dida defended Oxenford against him, but Ælfgar's warriors broke down the gates and Ælfgar strode into Oxenford, where Frithuswith and Dida confronted him.

PRINCE ÆLFGAR: There you are! You've led me a merry dance, you naughty girl. But I see you are as beautiful as I expected, and you're still a rich princess, so I'll marry you anyway. Just make sure you behave yourself from now on.

DIDA: (holding a sword) I may be old but I won't let you take my daughter!

FRITHUSWITH: (gently pushing Dida aside) it's all right Daddy. Oh Saint Catherine! Saint Cecilia! I beg you to aid your faithful servant.

JUTHWARA: Come on, you saints! I know I'm only a herb woman's daughter but Frithuswith is really something! Please aid her!

BEGU: Don't fail us now, saints! Let us make Oxenford a home of scholarship and prayer!

FRITHUSWITH: Saints, I command you! Stop this man!

PRINCE ÆLFGAR: (stepping forward and grabbing Frithuswith's arm) Ha ha! You can't escape me now...what?! (lets go of Frithuswith and moves his arm in front of his face) What's happened? I can't see!

FRITHUSWITH: The saints have answered! Foolish man, you have been blinded for your impiety.
The assembled townsfolk were astonished, and Prince Ælfgar's huscarles fled the city in terror lest they also be blinded by the holy power of Frithuswith.

PRINCE ÆLFGAR: (falling to his knees) I'm sorry! Forgive me!

JUTHWARA: Sorry you threatened Frithuswith or just sorry you didn't get away with it?

FRITHUSWITH: Hush. We must be just but also merciful. Prince Ælfgar, do you truly repent?

PRINCE ÆLFGAR: Oh my god yes! Please!

FRITHUSWITH: Saint Catherine! Saint Cecilia! Let this man be forgiven, and restore his sight.

PRINCE ÆLFGAR: (looking around) Oh thank god. I can see again. Let me out of here!

BEGU: Let that be a lesson to all princes! Do not set yourself against the holy lady Frithuswith!

Prince Ælfgar fled Oxenford and for centuries after, no king of England would enter the city, for fear of being struck blind like Ælfgar. Frithuswith, Juthwara and Begu returned to the monastery which became famous for the wisdom of its scholars.

The nuns never after ate bacon, in memory of their good friends the three pigs they met in the oak woods - and you may still hear tales of those pigs to this day.

Frithuswith lived a long and happy life, performing the occasional healing miracle. In her old age she retired to the little hermitage at Binsey where there is still a well you can see to this day, and pray to Saint Frithuswith for strength when other people tell you how to live your life.

Appendix: the Ducks of the Lord

On 30 November 2022, someone with the handle of drnelk⁵ posted on the social media site formerly known as Twitter that they asked an AI to write a Bible song about ducks. The AI was almost certainly ChatGPT⁶ which had been made public that day.

In 2023, Harry Wright set the words to music with a four-part arrangement (SATB).

Verse 1:

In the beginning God created the ducks,
He gave them wings so they could fly,
Filling the skies with their quacking call,
Their beauty is a wonder to behold.

5 <https://twitter.com/drnelk/status/1598048054724423681?lang=en-GB>

6 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ChatGPT>

Chorus:

Oh, the ducks of the Lord,

They fly on high,

Splashing in the water,

As they pass us by.

Verse 2:

God gave them webbed feet to swim in the lake,

A feathered coat to keep them warm,

Their wings are strong and carry them far,

From the water's edge to the stars.

Verse 3:

The Lord watches over His feathered flock

Providing food and shelter for them,

He calls them to Him when He needs them,

And gives them a home in the heavens.