WHEN THE SAINTS …

22nd of JUNE ALBAN

23RD of JUNE ETHELDREDA

24th of JUNE THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

27th of JUNE CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA

28th of JUNE IRENAEUS

The Venerable Bede’s account of St ALBAN is the only written witness we have of a Roman Christian church in England.

The few facts are these: in 287 Alban, a soldier, was protecting a priest from local persecution and became converted through his way of life and habit of prayer. When the local authorities heard of this they sent soldier’s to Alban’s home in search of the priest, but Alban placed himself into their hands rather than betraying his guest.

The local governor was infuriated when he discovered Alban’s deceit and had him whipped, but to no effect. When Alban declared himself a Christian the governor lost his temper and, when Alban not only refused to worship the pagan gods, but assured him that these gods were devils, the governor sentenced him to death.

On the road to execution there was a river outside Verulamium – present-day St Alban’s, but the bridge into the town was so crowded with on-lookers that the river couldn’t be crossed: the story is that Alban prayed to heaven and the waters parted, at which point the executioner dropped his sword and instantly converted.

When the party finally reached the place of execution another soldier struck Alban’s head from his shoulders, but his eyes fell out of their sockets and landed on the ground beside the head. Two named companions of Alban were also martyred, but there had now been enough miracles to alter the governor’s attitude, so that he ceased the persecution.

This is all we have, and most of the miracles serve to validate and vindicate a local saint once he has caught the imagination of a community. Bede’s simple account of Alban’s life demonstrates his compassion open-mindedness, loyalty and courage: that’s the stuff of a saint!

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With a church dedicated to ST ETHELDREDA down the Fulham Palace Road have you ever wondered who she might have been, or perhaps you know already.

The long name is a Latinisation of the Anglo-Saxon AETHELTHRYTH, mercifully known for centuries as Audrey: in fact our word ’tawdry ‘is an abbreviation of St Audrey, which refers to the shabby quality of merchandise available at her shrine.

Audrey was the daughter of King Anna, and was given in marriage to a first husband who died before its consummation. Thereafter she was ‘given’ to King Ecgfrith, whom Bede describes as noble and full of religion and good works.

Audrey lived with her royal husband for 12 years without losing her virginity, because, as Bede puts it, she wished to serve Christ, ‘the king on high,’ and be released from worldly cares. Bede relates how Ecgfrith attempted to induce Bishop St Wilfred with ‘many lands and much money’ to persuade Audrey to fulfil her marital ‘duty,’ because he knew that ‘She loved no man more.’

With very great difficulty Audrey convinced her husband to allow her to become a nun, and her veil was presented to her by Wilfred. After a year Audrey founded her own monastery on the Isle of Ely, where her life of prayer, asceticism and self-sacrifice became an example to many other ‘virgins.’

Audrey died in 678, within living memory of Bede himself, Wilfred and the physician Cynefryth, who treated a tumour that plagued Audrey, and probably killed her. Both Wilfred and Cynefryth testified to Bede that, 16 years after Audrey’s death, her sister, who took over as Abbess, wanted to re-inter Audrey in a place of honour, and in a stone sarcophagus, that when her body was exhumed it had not deteriorated, the linen wraps were fresh, and the tumour healed, leaving only a tiny scar. This was taken as final proof that Audrey had remained a virgin, ‘unsullied by the touch of man’ which had not previously been generally believed.

Once more, of course, people who rested their heads on the stone had their eye problems healed or ameliorated: demons were driven out of others, etc.

Frankly, the story not only illustrates Audrey’s determination to follow her calling, but shows Ecgfrith to have been every bit the noble and religious man that Bede describes: this was an age in which women were ‘given’ in marriage largely for motives of family alliances, and the notion that a woman, however exalted her status, could resist her husband in this way was extraordinary.

There are so many angles from which to come at this story that it’s really most prudent to leave it to you to work out your attitude. The only impairment to understanding how and why many women – not necessarily in the west – choose to become ‘brides of Christ’ seems to be the total absence either in reference books or online of any sane, spiritually motivated article on the subject.

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The BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST is recounted only in Luke ch1 v5ff. For understandable reasons it is preferable to celebrate his birth rather than his squalid death, which, far from being that of a martyr, functions, perhaps, almost as an acted parable illustrative of the degeneration into which Israel had fallen by his time.

The actual circumstances of John’s birth are less important than prophecy to Zachariah regarding John’s future role: Elijah comes up time and again in the Gospels and we hardly notice; partly because he is a far more significant figure in Judaism than in Christianity; and because we tend to overlook the tradition that Jesus and his disciples refer to, that the coming of the Messiah would be prefaced by the reappearance of Elijah; [Mat ch11 v2ff;] Jesus proclaims John as the ‘Elijah that was to come:’

The other important passage surrounding the birth is the ‘Benedicite’ that John’s father sings when ‘filled with the Holy Spirit.’ When we sing this ourselves in church, it’s worth remembering its original context, and that Zachariah is addressing the infant John.

An interesting matter of speculation is how and why John came to reject the priesthood, which he would have inherited as Zachariah’s son. We can assume that, after the prophecy from the Angel Gabriel, Zachariah would have retained a pretty high estimation of how his son might turn out, which would, no doubt, have coloured John’s upbringing. The whole point of John’s future prophetic ministry, however, was to cut away the presumption that ‘children of Abraham’ would enjoyed righteous standing with God per se, and to detach fellow Jews from the temple cultus served by his father, the priest. Put quite simply, John’s rejection of his father’s heritage as priest is undergirded by the whole theological significance of his prophetic ministry.

And this significance can hardly be understated. Those who study the Gospels carefully would understand that the Pharisees’ aims were not as ill-intentioned as we might think from just listening to readings in church. They were actually a democratic lot who sought to separate the concept of righteousness from the temple cult, with its administration by a class of priests and elders who had, in their judgement, thrown in their hand with the Roman oppressors. By exhaustive study of the Torah - the first five books of our bible – they had worked out that if Jewish people observed any number of rules and regulations, they could stay on the right side of God. Not surprisingly, as teachers can, many of them got above themselves, but in intention they were nearer to Jesus than the occasional Gospel snippet half-heard and –understood in church might lead us to believe.

John had taken one step further, by proposing baptism as a means of starting afresh with God, after which he cuts to the chase and exhorts his hearers to lead a life of what St Francis de Sales would have described as ‘ordinary goodness.’ rather than trying to adhere to the 613 stipulations on the Pharisees’ agenda for salvation: in other words, John makes the prospect of salvation accessible to the lowliest in society.

Certainly his main aim is to get his hearers away from slavish dependence on the temple cult, and into a state of ethical and spiritual readiness to receive the Messiah. The rest we know: Jesus declares that the temple cannot last forever, and that faith in him and his teachings will be all that God requires of them.

The early chapters of Luke are written in an almost self-conscious imitation of the Old Testament; and, from a literary standpoint, these early chapters are Luke’s narrative way of connecting the Gospel with the prophetic tradition that the early church imagined had specifically predicted the birth of Jesus. Much of what John has to say is held in common with Isaiah, and there seems to be nothing either in the Magnificat or the Benedicite that would have been new to a pious Jew familiar with the prophets.

In earthly terms John can seem a tragic figure, and Jesus’ epitaph on him in Matthew ch11 could be read as damning him with faint praise, but, assuming they were cousins; that they shared a ministry of baptism for a while; that John not only predicted and pointed Jesus out as the Messiah; that John ‘s baptism of Jesus opened up a new phase in Jesus’ ministry; that John was content to fade into relative obscurity while Jesus attracted larger crowds, including some of his own previous disciples; that Jesus doesn’t appear to have commenced his own public ministry until after John’s arrest: all these indicate the esteem, respect and affection in which John was held by Jesus.

Walter Wink, in his article on John in the Oxford Companion to the bible writes this:

‘The evangelists each employ the traditions about John in the service of the proclamation about Jesus: each handles him differently, but all see him as the one who stands at the beginning of the Gospel story, demanding of the hearer a beginner’s mind and the jettisoning of all previous securities, so that a new word can be heard.’

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CYRIL of ALEXANDRIA was born in 376 and died in 444. He is canonised in honour of the Christological stand he took and maintained as to the ‘indivisibility of the two natures,’ and the status of Mary as ‘Theotokos = God-bearer,’ as opposed to ‘Christotokos = Christ-bearer.’

Robert Atwell, author of ‘Celebrating the saints’ and ‘Celebrating the seasons,’ taught patristics at Cambridge for six years; was an Anglican priest working in London, and spent his final years as a monk; so his authority in these matters is beyond doubt. Atwell states of Cyril:

Cyril’s writings reflect his outstanding qualities as a theologian. They are marked by precision in exposition, accuracy in thought and skill in reasoning.

During Cyril’s early childhood his uncle Theophilus became Patriarch of Alexandria, and under his guidance Cyril was well educated and became familiar with contemporary Christian writings,

In 403 Cyril accompanied his uncle to a synod at Constantinople at which Theophilus demonstrated his own violent, underhand and deceitful modus operandi in getting his own way. The previous year Theophilus had been summoned to another synod under the presidency of Archbishop John Chrysostom, at which a number of monks had registered complaints against him; following his persecution of them as Origenists, and having led a band of soldiers and armed servants to burn their dwellings and ill-treat those he had captured. At the 403 synod Cyril arrived with 29 of his own bishops, and plotted with Chrysostom’s opponents among the others to get him deposed.

This was the example of strong-arm leadership that Cyril adopted when, in 412, following the death of his uncle, he managed, after a riot, to get himself elected Patriarch. …

Alexandria had been founded by Alexander the Great in late 4th century b c e, and became a prosperous commercial centre, and one of much culture and learning. The original inhabitants were pagan, but the city attracted many thousands of Jews, who enriched it and brought their own religion. The ornament of the city was a Jew named Philo, who set up what was the world’s greatest library there. Later a Christian community developed, and with it a tradition of original and clear-eyed theology, from Clement in the 2nd century, to the great but controversial Origen, and now Cyril.

There were five major centres of the church at this time: Constantinople, Rome, Alexandria Antioch and Jerusalem. Each had its own cultural and theological tradition, and, naturally enough, rivalries existed amongst them. …

Cyril commenced his reign as patriarch by closing down the churches of one Christian minority and confiscating their goods. There were frequent inter-communal riots among the pagans, Jews and Christians which were seriously exacerbated by increasingly intense conflict between Cyril and the Prefect of Alexandria, Orestes. As a result Cyril managed to exile a significant section of the Jewish community after a massacre of Christians for which a minority of Jews were undoubtedly responsible.

Cyril may not have been directly responsible for the murder of the leading philosopher and scientist Hypatia, but the atmosphere in which this atrocity took place was of his making, and probably occurred because of factional enmities among Christians themselves.

Perhaps it isn’t the time and place to be giving chapter and verse on Cyril’s ‘dirty tricks,’ and space won’t allow, because the disputes within the church between the 420’s and 451 were truly ‘Byzantine,’ in both senses of the word. Suffice it to say that if Armando Iannucci had been around at the time we’d have had a wonderful box set. Any reliable account of church history or theology will furnish the details if you have time or inclination.

The rub is that not only did Cyril and his party play public sentiment around the status of Mary; they ran a grubby campaign of vilification against Nestorius, who was Patriarch of Constantinople at the time, which involved trying to persuade the emperor, who was being pulled in either direction by his wife and his mother: Cyril got the Pope involved, who really wanted to leave the question to the Byzantine authorities; but, above all, he was playing off the long-standing rivalry between Alexandria and Antioch.

It is suggested that Cyril was canonised on account of his undoubted theological achievements, as understood, however, only among that majority of Christians world-wide who accept the council of Chalcedon [451] to have put the lid soundly on Christian orthodoxy.

When we remember and pray for Christians in the Middle East, the Caucuses, the Indian sub-continent and parts of North-East Africa who are suffering discrimination and persecution today, the vast majority of these did not, and still do not, accept Chalcedon.

It’s encouraging to learn that political correctness has so far crept into the Anglican understanding of church history that we’re no longer to call these important constituencies of God’s church ‘Nestorians’ or ‘Monophysites,’ for fear of causing offence, but, in reality, Nestorius ended up on the losing side of Eurocentric church history and his theology was misrepresented and misunderstood, very largely through Cyril’s ‘dirty tricks department,’ and those of his followers after Cyril’s death in 444.

Those of us who value theology above ethics may find it possible to disregard or ignore Cyril’s methods, in the interests of what passes for church unity; but Thomas Merton reminds us that when we pray for peace and unity we’d better be sure of what sacrifices and adjustments might be involved, otherwise God simply allows the status quo to continue because he knows that the status quo is all we really want in our hearts.

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IRENAEUS was born around 130, in or around Smyrna, and was educated in Rome, from whence he settled in Lyon as priest, becoming bishop in 177, following the death of his predecessor during a persecution from which Irenaeus had been fortunately absent on an embassy.

As a young man he had heard Polycarp preaching, who in turn, knew John the Apostle, so that he is seen as a connection between the first and second centuries, and between the apostolic and early church. As such he recorded some valuable information about the Gospels; how and when they were written, and could trace all the bishops of Rome back to Peter.

The only complete work we have of his is entitled ‘Against heresies,’ which, despite having to deal with many versions of Gnosticism, rather than being a polemic, contains some, luminous passages of theology, with many simple sentences with profound and comforting thoughts.

He is honoured as the first catholic theologian, contrasting Judaism with Christianity, in that the former provided the basis for maintaining the one national God, whereas the latter becomes the bridge by which to proceed from the one nation to preach the truth worldwide. He contrasted Christianity with Gnosticism, in that the latter had a message primarily for a small minority, whereas the Christian Gospel was to be proclaimed everywhere. The Gnostics, Irenaeus claims, were trying to drive a wedge between Jesus, with his original disciples, and Paul.

In order to authenticate these principles Irenaeus makes it clear that the message of Jesus was given clearly to his disciples, and from them, new leaders were carefully chosen to carry Jesus; truths down the generations through the universal church; its branches, and into the world at large.

Other than the one complete work of Irenaeus that we have, Eusebius, the first and greatest historian of the early church, writes kindly and with deep affection of Irenaeus and quotes extensively with approval, and sometimes at length, from works of his which are otherwise lost.

Here are some quotes to illustrate Irenaeus at his best:

As those who see light stand within its compass and share its brilliancy, so those who see God are in god, and share his splendour.

The Son has revealed the Father from the beginning. He was with the Father in the beginning. He revealed God to the human race through the visions of the prophets, through various gifts, through his own ministry and the glory of the Father, at appropriate times, and in order, for our benefit.

This is why the Word became the disposer of the Father’s grace, for the benefit of humankind, and for our sake made these generous arrangements; revealing god to us, and raising us to God. In raising us to God, he shields the Father from human sight, lest we ever undervalue God through familiarity, and also so that we always have something to strive after. On the other hand, he revealed God to us that we would not fall away, and as a result, cease to exist; FOR THE GLORY OF GOD IS A HUMAN BEING FULLY ALIVE, and the life of humanity consists in the vision of God. Thus if the revelation of god in this world gives life to every living thing, how much more will the revelation of the Father by the Word give life to those who see god.

God is the glory of humankind. We are the vessels which receive god’s action, his wisdom and power.

From the beginning the Son is present to creation, reveals the Father to all, to those the Father chooses, when the father chooses, and as the Father chooses.

Can you sense a little of John seeping through this simple but deeply resonant writing?

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PRAYER

Almighty God who upheld your servant Irenaeus to maintain the truth against every blast of vain doctrine, keep us, we pray, steadfast in your true religion, that in constancy and peace we may walk in the way that leads to eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, …

This week let’s take time to think through the whole meaning and intention of this prayer: what is true religion, and what is peace, and how we live in tension between the two.