WHEN THE SAINTS....

29TH OF JUNE PETER and PAUL

1st of JULY JOHN and HENRY VENN

5TH of JULY THOMAS the APOSTLE

The 29th June, the church’s celebration of PETER and PAUL, is often known as Peter-tide, and is the time at which a lot of ordinations take place: we could say, then, that it’s an opportunity to make special prayers not only for those to be ordained, but to reflect on the whole institution of ordained priesthood within the church, vis-à-vis other equally essential spheres of leadership and administration.

The nearest thing to ordination in the Bible, apart from Jesus’ special commission to Peter, is his bestowal of charismatic powers first when he commissions the twelve, and, later the 72, to go out and proclaim the Kingdom. At John ch20, on the risen lord’s appearance to the disciples, he bestows the spirit by breathing on them.

The laying on of hands as an outward sign of the bestowal of the Holy Spirit on those individuals so commissioned occurs in Acts ch13, when Barnabas and Paul are sent off from Antioch to do the Spirit’s work among the gentiles. At Acts ch10, when Peter meets the Roman God-fearer Cornelius, the Holy Spirit ‘falls,’ which is why the episode is known as the Gentile Pentecost: Peter doesn’t ordain anybody.

In the early church bishops seem to have been elected, such people, presumably, having been chosen for their leadership qualities but, principally for their perceived holiness of life. Such elections would, for the most part, have given congregations the sense of having a stake in their own churches. By the time Constantine institutionalised the church, far from being the prime target in a persecution, the position of bishop was now one of privilege, and became part of the system of patronage.

It’s been understood for generations that an apostolic succession from Peter cannot be validated historically, so why do we, in a church whose head is the monarch, insist on linking ordination with Peter; let alone Paul?

The answer, surely, is that leadership in the church is not the exclusive preserve of ordained ministers. In a sermon, St Augustine concedes that whilst the keys to the Kingdom were given to Peter, the Holy Spirit was bestowed on the entirety of the church. One of Luther’s radical ideas, formulated in reaction to a heavily top-down version of church, was that epitomised as ‘The priesthood of all believers.’ What this actually means is; the totality of all believing Christians forms a priesthood in the world.’ It is not intended to abolish the calling or the role of the priest; but, perhaps, to remind us that priesthood is one calling among many in the church, which, when ended, restores the bearer of these vital responsibilities to one among the many.

There will surely come a time when the celebration of Peter and Paul will become one of all the ministries in the church which are, at present, subordinated to that of the priesthood. The work of a parish secretary is vital, and the recent debacle over the co-op’s finances has shown, albeit negatively, the value of a wise treasurer with financial probity.

Conversely, it is becoming clearer, not only through the experience of the ordinary parishioner, but through the work, for example, of a former boss of Westminster Pastoral Foundation, Dr Tom Leary, that far too many pressures both moral and administrative, are placed on clergy and their families.

Peter and Paul, however, together form as satisfactory a microcosm of church leadership on earth as any: they complement each other in so many ways. We might ask: ‘what about John, wasn’t he equally important?’ This week we also celebrate Thomas the Apostle, who stands in for all subsequent disciples? Viewed carefully, Peter and Paul together model the whole dynamic of God’s church, not least because their violent quarrels were ultimately subsumed in their martyrdoms during the Neronic persecution of 64.

Just as we understand that whilst remaining eternal, the Trinity is dynamic within, so, while God’s church may be one entity throughout eternity, the differences, and even the disputes, between Peter and Paul represent the same dynamic of continuous exchange and movement within the church, although impeded by human sin and our inability to grasp the whole of God’s truth or meaning.

Of course there are many other dynamics at work in the church over the centuries; time, place; language and, culture; economics, but another important tension, exists between revelations of the Spirit to chosen prophets and mystics, and their containment within the essential boundaries of church order. Peter and Paul were endowed both with prophetic and mystical charisma, but, on the other hand, both struggled with issues of church order. While Jesus speaks of new wine in old skins, the example of the Pharisee Gamaliel stands as a model for those in authority who have been sufficiently grounded both in faith and prayer to attempt to mediate between the these two potent forces and tentatively re-define boundaries.

Another vitally important dynamic shared by both Peter and Paul which occupies the centre of their lives, and that of the church as a whole is brokenness. This may seem almost heretical for those who expect perfection from church leaders of every stripe, but it does seem that, for whatever reason beyond our comprehension, God uses our brokenness as an opportunity to impart us with new strength, which often results in lives re-directed.

Peter had practical skills; an earthy piety and, as skipper of his boat, there was a potential for leadership that Jesus saw more clearly than anybody else. Nowadays people are often encouraged to say the second thing that comes into their minds, but nobody had yet thought to suggest this to Peter. His impulsiveness frequently got him into a fix, but never as badly as when he swore to Jesus that he’d never forsake him come what may. There are all kinds of literary and musical attempts to represent Peter’s self-loathing following his three denials, but how can they begin to approach what he must have felt! The three reaffirmations of his love for Jesus near the end of John’s Gospel are for Peter’s reassurance and re-instatement rather than anything Jesus needed from him. Jesus’ commission to Peter to ‘feed my sheep’ has a far deeper and richer biblical and theological resonance than the image of the ‘rock.’

Paul’s brokenness is of a different nature: the third chapter of Philippians has the broader picture; that, as a well-born and privileged Roman citizen; a Pharisee with the additional suit of a Hellenistic education, Paul was set up for a life of distinction. Gamaliel, his equally distinguished and well reputed teacher, would, doubtless, somehow have furnished Paul with an ability to see matters from both sides, but such moderation had been relegated to somewhere in Paul’s sub-conscious by the time he left Jerusalem and went after these Christian ‘sectaries’ an enterprise which, by the way, may not have even sanctioned legally or by tradition: so he’s already content to break existing boundaries, and the rest we know.

Whether Paul – Saul – actually went blind is a question that could be answered at two levels: yes, he might have, but there’s also a profound image of a lost and broken soul. An interesting speculation, furthermore, is whether his famous ‘thorn in the flesh’ might have been a residual impairment of his vision: ‘See what large letters I write…’ This is someone with an education in rhetoric, but he admits that he’s no orator: if lacking eye contact with his hearers he’s unlikely to be able to hold the attention of a crowd very easily? If his original blindness had been ‘healed,’ he could pray with all faith that God might restore his vision to its pristine state, but he understands that God needs to keep him right size.

This brokenness had fractured the church long before Peter and Paul fell out over protocol for gentile converts. It’s really a dynamic the church inherits from its Jewish roots, where passionately held beliefs engender fierce controversies, often vitiated with parti pris and, vituperative personal abuse and hatred. It is important to understand that these sins that so often tarnish and contaminate even the lives of the saints are mostly perversions of a passionate love and a conscientious search for justice and truth.

Tom Wright informs his readers that’ There was never one Christian church; only Christian churches; but, of course, he’s referring to the church here on Earth.

St Augustine also maintained that the role of a priest is valid, regardless of his ‘worthiness;’ in other words, that it is primarily the office, rather than the individual human, that is engraced. Given that we have established that brokenness is an essential manifestation of Church, is it realistic or mature to expect our priests to be more saintly than the saints themselves?

**\*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\***

JOHN and HENRY VENN were important figures both in the anti-slavery campaign and in the church missionary Society. At a time when we are emphasising that ‘black lives matter’ the importance of their work can hardly be over-estimated.

John Venn was born in 1754 and became rector of Holy Trinity Clapham in 1792, when Clapham was a village south of London, surrounded by rich villas. Many of the men and women who became members of the ‘Clapham Sect’ lived in the area and attended Holy Trinity. John died in 1813: his son Henry, born in 1796, became, in 1846, the secretary of the Church Missionary Society, and remained its administrative and organising Genius for the next 32 years until his death in 1878.

The Clapham Sect was an extraordinary group of well-healed philanthropists all of whom were Evangelical Christians, who earned the nickname of ‘the saints,’ through their consistent efforts to put an end to the slave trade; to make slavery itself illegal in Britain, and to campaign to have slavery abolished worldwide. They were also keen to bring about penal reform; and to improve morality generally. By their instigation, the colony of Sierra Leone was established for freed slaves to live, and another of the Clapham Sect’s members founded Freetown and became its first governor.

By the middle of the 19th century the group had grown to include anything up to a third of all Anglican clergy, though no longer known as the ‘Sect.’ It is suggested that their campaigns and their work set the bench-mark for early Victorian morality. They were not single issue campaigners; working wherever possible to improve life, even to the extent of campaigning against cock-fighting and bear-baiting, and their support of the Factory Act improved a lot of workers.

One of the leading lights in the group was William Wilberforce, the MP and socialite who became a convert to the Evangelical church at the age of 26, and thought to resign his seat until John Newton, author of ‘Amazing Grace,’ encouraged him to remain, thinking of the good he could potentially accomplish by doing so. He was a friend of the Prime Minister, Pitt the younger, who supported his campaign and helped Wilberforce present the abolition bill time after time until it finally passed into law. Incidentally, William Hague wrote an excellent biography of Wilberforce which is highly recommended.

Among other members of the original Sect were the banker, Henry Thornton; Granville Sharp, a lawyer who had already won a decision that slavery was illegal in England. Lord Teignmouth, sometime governor of India; Charles Grant, a powerful member of the East India Council; Zachary Macaulay, an estate manager and businessman; James Steven, who sat in court; and literary celebrity and writer on religious affairs, Hannah Moore.

They combined their efforts to influence public opinion, and to exert pressure on the government, by means of a journal, pamphlets and speaking. They were fortunate in having the support of the Bishop of London, and, eventually, of the Evangelical Archbishop of Canterbury.

What makes this group extra special is the extent of their individual sacrifices to further their cause: Macaulay, for example, lost night after night of sleep at his tasks, and neglected his business to the extent that he lost much of his fortune. The banker Henry Thornton contributed up to 80% of his income to charity: another member of the Sect was hounded to death by malicious rumours, while Wilberforce himself suffered a break-down and had to be physically defended from death threats by another MP, pistol in hand!

In 1807, however, 18 years after the Abolition Bill was first presented in parliament, it passed; and finally, in 1833, months before Wilberforce died, the Emancipation Bill was passed following defeat after defeat.

Henry Venn had what would have been considered extraordinarily enlightened views on mission for his time: if you recall the article on Ini Kopuria, missionary to the Solomon Islands, he was encouraged by his bishop to grow his own native church communities, as opposed to Sundar Singh’s bishop, whose narrow-mindedness about wearing clerical garb and singing English hymns forced Sundar to leave college and strike out on his own.

Henry Venn was determined to provide preaching in vernacular languages in Africa, and to produce Bibles as soon as practicable: he was keen to set up a church led and supported by Africans, and told his African staff to disregard every European custom and taste except the Gospel values. They were undeterred by failure, supposing that, just because circumstances didn’t seem favourable, this was no excuse for waiting. Henry Venn was fully aware of the tendency among white missionaries to impair their ministry by high-handedness and the sense of superiority that many other missionaries brought to their work, almost without conscious awareness.

One thing that seems to characterise the Clapham Sect, with its distinguished achievements, is their mutual love and care, meeting, as they did, in their own houses, and supporting one another through failures, and being content to accept with grace any small concession they were able to win. Perhaps some single-issue campaigners in our own time could achieve more and keep the public onside if they could only learn that lesson!

**\*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\***

THOMAS the APOSTLE is our friend and mentor. Those of previous generations who exhorted children and others not to be a ‘doubting Thomas’ either didn’t read the Gospels carefully enough, or failed to understand the distinction between faith as trust and belief, on the one hand, and faith as loyalty on the other. The former might be characterised as passive faith; the latter as active.

Thomas is mentioned in all four gospels, but principally in John. At John ch11 v16 where he encourages the rest of the disciples to join him in following, Jesus to Jerusalem, [let us die with him,] even while, at the same time, perhaps demonstrating something less than undiluted trust in the future!

He is better known, as is Phillip, at ch14, for having questioned Jesus as to where he might be going … He’s what we might call a sceptic, and what a philosopher would term an empiricist; ‘unless I can see/experience Jesus’ resurrection I can’t [not won’t] believe.

There is a difference between scepticism, which is healthy, on the whole, and cynicism, which is a stubborn determination to stay pessimistic and so to constrain oneself to thinking the worst. It is love that generates his doubt: he simply won’t dare to believe.

In a sermon, Gregory the Great proclaims that this whole sequence of events was, in fact, part of God’s providence. Here in ch20, as in ch17, during Jesus’ beautiful prayers for present and future disciples, it is clear that Thomas stands in for you and me. We cannot experience the physical presence of the risen Christ, for all that this gift has very occasionally been bestowed on a mystic or a saint. Jesus affirms: ‘blessed is [s]he who believes without the physical experience of his risen presence. It is the ecstasy of Thomas’s joy that prompts him to exclaim: My Lord and my God!’

One shouldn’t undervalue Thomas’s courage in speaking out when others might judge him for doing so; ‘doubting Thomas’ is a judgement in itself. Those of us who have taken part in experiential group work learn that to speak out is often to voice the queries and doubts of those who have so far lacked the courage to express them: Thomas’s initiative at ch14 facilitates Phillip’s later request for Jesus to ‘show us the Kingdom …’

One intriguing aspect of Thomas that doesn’t get mentioned is that he is a twin, and one might wonder where the other twin might be. A good deal of work has been undertaken around the psychology of twins, and the loss or absence of one can leave a deep emotional need to attach to somebody else.

So much for Psychology. Fortunately another Thomas, Thomas Merton, wrote very reassuringly of the actual necessity for people with faith to hold it in tension with a certain amount of healthy doubt. Without doubt, after all, faith becomes certainty, and we know from experience what dangerous places we arrive at when armed with certainty! We are, after all, at base, nothing more than theological and spiritual speculators! The experience of prayer and meditation can, hopefully, at times feel like a rock of certainty, but how we interpret and build on those experiences requires self-understanding, reflection and the healthy realism that comes from doubt.

Just as broken bones set more strongly than before, so broken or bruised relationships can heal more strongly: when we pray: ‘’Lord, I believe: help my unbelief…’ God does, so often, answer that prayer, when made sincerely, with a gift of strength and reassurance.

**\*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\***

**PRAYER**

‘Lord I believe: help my unbelief.’

Spend a while reflecting on your faith journey, and try to recall times when your faith has been seriously tested.

Try, also, to pray through how you might wish things to improve in response to our upheavals during the lock-down.