WHEN THE SAINTS…

8TH of JUNE THOMAS KEN

9TH of JUNE COLUMBA

 EPHREM of SYRIA

11TH of JUNE BARNABAS the APOSTLE

14TH of JUNE RICHARD BAXTER

Richard Baxter and Thomas ken both lived in England in the seventeenth century; Baxter a generation earlier, and each one an exemplary representative of their particular ‘party’ on the fringes of the C of E: we’ll take them together, and out of order.

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BACKGROUND - [you can skip this if you know it!]

Perhaps the most interesting book on the subject of the English Commonwealth in the 1650’s is still Christopher Hill’s ‘The World Turned Upside-down,’ published in 1972; a brilliantly-written account of the English revolution from a Marxist standpoint, majoring more on political and socio-economic aspects of the ‘Cromwellian underground than the far more significant religious dynamic. We should not, however, downplay social class in the mix, since Puritans needed support from magistrates and even MP’s to enforce their ‘godly’ agenda, not to mention the patrons within whose gift a benefice lay. In the absence of such support Puritans had an up-hill struggle.

If we concentrate on Cromwell banning everything from Christmas to church organs, we overlook the extent of continued prayer book worship. In many areas of the country the Puritans never got the upper hand; in many others they were forced to play second fiddle, ministering outside an established parish church; and in some parishes prayer book services were run in secret, much as Catholic ones had been a couple of generations previously. One factor exacerbating the element of class conflict was that many of the lower strata of rural society, in particular, had deeply felt attachments to the prayer book through its rites of passage and festivals.

Wherever your sympathies lie, the truth is, as ever, that there were charitable, peace-loving and just individuals on all sides of the divide, of whom Richard Baxter and Thomas Ken were two shining examples.

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RICHARD BAXTER, somewhere described as ‘The Bishop of non-conformity,’ was born in 1615, and grew up in an atmosphere of Laudianism, when Puritans were regarded as small aberrant groups: by the time of his death in 1691, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists and Quakers had become well established, with their own chapels and meeting houses; their own beliefs and distinct ways of life. Baxter was ordained deacon in 1638, but found himself drawn increasingly to non-conformity. He made his mark as an army chaplain, though throughout his life he was troubled by ill health, which, in fact, gave an impetus to his work, because, as he remarked, he never knew whether, for example, the sermon he was to preach might be his last.

He was influential at several stages of his life, but his years at Kidderminster set an example of ministry that many other puritans strove to emulate. He had the charge of some 800 households, but usually had the help of one assistant and two deacons: importantly, he also had good support from the bailiff, the chief magistrates, and from the patron of his church, who was also the local JP. He preached every Sunday and Thursday, with additional services on special occasions; and attendance was so high that five galleries had to be erected in his church. There would be meetings in the week to discuss the sermons, and communion was given monthly. Baxter was keen on catechising, and distributed Bibles and godly books so that most people had one. He also set up schools and charities for the poor.

There was no disciplinary structure throughout the commonwealth church, but Baxter invited parishioners to accept a voluntary discipline; and about 600 out of a potential 1600 communicants agreed; but only these became eligible to receive communion. He was willing to baptise all infants having examined the parents.

He set up a monthly council of ministers, deacons and around 20 lay ‘elders,’ including several justices, and the sanction was usually informal warnings, with excommunication a very last resort. Baxter accepted that there were recalcitrant individuals and back-sliders, and he sensibly understood that neither preaching nor prosecution could eliminate ‘the odious, swinish sin of drunkenness, though ’various, notorious gamblers, wife-beaters and drunkards, placed in the stocks from time to time, had served to discredit worldly values[!] He claimed that,’ by the end of the 1650’s, Sabbath disorders were a thing of the past.’

He was a conscientious pastor, and a notable preacher, and towards the end of his life, when he’d been expelled from the Church of England, he concentrated on his many writings, the best known of which is his ‘Reformed Pastor, which sold for generations.

‘It is a fearful case to be an unsanctified professor; but much more to be an unsanctified preacher. Preach to yourselves the sermons that you study before you preach them to others; for God never saved any man for being a preacher: many a preacher is now in Hell … All the week long is little enough to study how to speak two hours[!!] Be much, above all, in secret prayer and meditation: The people will likely feel when you have been much with God. … Remember that they must be weakened of or damned.’

Baxter viewed godliness and holiness to be much the same thing, and for him the family priority, worship, moral uprightness and good relations with others were inseparably bound together in the total Christian life. When challenged that religion had caused much division in the world, Baxter replies:

‘… we are not to answer for the miscarriages every infidel or ungodly man that will put on the name of Christianity and godliness. If there should be fallings out among the godly, they cannot rest until they are healed, and set in joint again; but, then, you must not be so unjust as to conclude that we can have no unity until we are in all things of a mind: may not many men of all complexions be of one society? …Is not the tree one that has many branches?’

Apart from everything else, Baxter’s principal and most lasting gift was as peace-maker and ambassador among the various parties of the church at the time. He was himself an Episcopalian, but he also advocated for other non-conformists, and was a gifted and subtle theologian, who plotted a middle way between Calvin’s double predestination – [God predestines both the saved and the damned!] and those who insisted on the priority of ‘good works’. Like many such peace-makers, however, Baxter received brick backs from both sides, though ultimately it was his subtle diplomacy that carried the torch of moderation into the future, after 1689, when the puritan tendency within the C of E had been finally defeated; into the generation of the 1730’s and the birth of Methodism.

Baxter wrote:

‘The most that keeps us at odds is but about the right form and order of church government. Is the distance so great that that Presbyterian, Episcopal and independent might not be well agreed, were they but heartily willing and forward for peace, they might … if we could not in every point agree, we might easily find out and narrow our differences and hold communion on our agreement in the main. … But is this much done? It is not done. To the shame of all our faces, it is not done. Let each party flatter themselves as they please, it will be recorded to the shame of the ministry of England while the Gospel shall abide in the Christian world.’

Again, he writes:

‘Christianity is our religion; protesting against popery is our negation: Christianity is it that we are agreed and that is our religion, and nothing but that: protestantcy as such is but our wiping off the dirt. We still profess before men and angels that we own no religion but the Christian religion; nor any church but the Christian church; nor dream of any church but one, containing all the Christians in the world, united with Jesus Christ as the head.’

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THOMAS KEN was born in 1637; attended Oxford; was ordained in 1662, and worked first as rector of a poor parish in the diocese of Winchester, and then at Winchester College for ten years, before becoming chaplain to Princess Mary at the Hague [1679-80.] As chaplain to Charles II he earned the king’s respect by refusing to receive Nell Gwyn at his house. In recognition of this boldness, he was appointed bishop of Bath & Wells in 1684, and attended Charles on his deathbed.

After the accession of the Roman Catholic James II, the new king proposed to rescind the penal laws made at the restoration against members of churches other than the re-established C of E, and demanded that this act of indulgence be read in churches throughout the land. For James this was a step towards emancipating Roman Catholics, but it would also have allowed non-conformists additional freedoms, to which seven bishops objected and refused James’s command. For this they were imprisoned in the Tower; but when they came to trial, juries refused to convict them and they walked free.

After ‘the glorious revolution, Archbishop William Sancroft and six other bishops, including Thomas, declined to take an oath of allegiance to William & Mary, despite James having abandoned the throne. Their position was that they had already taken such an oath to a monarch who was still living: James had done nothing to earn such principled loyalty, but the bishops’ allegiance was sworn regardless of James’s nationwide unpopularity and considerable personal failings.

Moreover, in 1703, when Kidder, his successor at Bath & Wells died, Thomas declined the offer to be re-instated, and spent the last 20 years of his life in dignity and peace, unlike most of his fellow non-jurors, who became ever more fractious, typified by the rantings of a Yorkshireman named George Hickes, wrote of those clergy who folded under pressure and swore allegiance to the new monarch:

‘They can perform no valid acts of priesthood: their very prayers are sin: their sacraments are no sacraments; their absolutions are null and void: God ratifies nothing in heaven which they do in his name upon Earth: they, and all that adhere to them are out of the church.’

To make their position clear, Archbishop Sancroft encouraged the non-jurors never to pass up an opportunity of declaring their loyalty to the reformation, and their implacable opposition to ‘the errors, superstitions, idolatries and tyrannies of the church of Rome.’ So that, with their hatred of all things Lutheran, and considering nonconformists as barely human – let alone Christian – their resentment and isolation brought fresh quarrels amongst themselves, so that their contribution to Christian unity was somewhat circumscribed.

Thomas, on the other hand, made the best of his situation and did what he could to engender peace and reconciliation not only among his fellow non-jurors, but with the church he loved.

He was the last of the non-juring bishops to die in 1711, and has been hailed ever since as their leading light.

During his time as bishop, Thomas not only organised relief for Huguenot [French Calvinist] refugees, but established schools for poor children, and adopted such personal pieties as having twelve poor men and women dine with him every Sunday. It’s one thing to give aid at arm’s length; quite another to invite strangers into the home.

In the 20 years of his private seclusion, Thomas wrote other devotional classics in addition to the ‘manual of Prayer for Winchester Scholars’ of 1695, which contains several well-known hymns.

Here’s his ASCRIPTION OF PRAISE TO THE TRINITY:

‘To God the Father, who first loved us, and made us accepted in the beloved; to God the Son, who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood; to God the Holy Ghost who sheds the love of God abroad in our hearts, be all love and all glory for all time and eternity. AMEN.’

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Few enough facts are known about the life of COLUMBA to fill one paragraph. He was born in Ireland probably in 521, having already founded monasteries in Durrow and Derry; came to Iona in 563, and died there either in 592 or 597.

He arrived on Iona with twelve followers and established an abbey, built of stones and wood, from whence he set out to convert pagan Scotland and strictly speaking re-convert northern England, with Romanised Christianity having either disappeared or seriously degenerated.

Since St Patrick had assisted in evangelising Ireland, there was no episcopal or social structure, for that matter, that any Romanised bishops were used to dealing with, so that monasteries were set up, which, however, were attached to the various heads of clans that covered the whole island; so that a form of Christianity developed that drew on pre-existing Celtic pagan tradition rather more than do other Christian churches.

After Columba’s death the monks of the Iona community became justly famous for the beauty of their manuscript illumination and their sculpture. Diarmaid MacCulloch postulates a cultural link with Syria, Middle Eastern and Coptic churches through similarities in art work and theology. Spiritually moreover, it is suggested that these Celtic monks’ austere lives matched the austerity of the Eastern Desert Fathers.

The modern take on Celtic Christianity is, perhaps, related to the whole rediscovery of the Celtic world, and whatever the extent of honest and even radical spirituality may have come from its modern revival, the original church lacked sufficient cohesion or structure to be able to withstand the impact of the far stronger Roman missionaries when they arrived.

One aspect of the original spirituality that has lasted since its importation into Europe as a whole were the tariff books, calculating standardised penances for various sins; something that became the institution of confession/reconciliation in the Roman church.

A Catholic foundation of nuns was established on Iona in the twelfth century, which became a victim of the reformation, until another community was set up in recent times, since when its take on Celtic Christianity has gained much interest and many adherents; and nothing should detract from the generally benign influence these have exerted on contemporary social and ecological ethics.

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EPHREM the SYRIAN will be a total surprise for most of us. He is esteemed the greatest poet of the early church; equal of Dante and most significant of the church fathers in the Syrian tradition and declared Doctor of the Church by Pope Benedict XV in 1920.

His poetry, written to be sung to popular tunes, is used within all the major denominations of the Syriac-speaking churches, and translations of his writings occur in all Orthodox liturgies. Ephrem was born into a Christian family in 306. At some stage in his life he became a deacon, but never a monk, although his ascetic way of life is well authenticated.

It is possible that he accompanied St James of Nisibis to the council of Nicaea; but, be that as it may, Ephrem supported Nicene doctrine, and wrote extensively against Arianism and other contemporary heresies. Fortunately his life work predates the various Christological controversies that split the church in the 5th and 6th centuries, so that his work is esteemed, valued and used by all in the Orthodox and western traditions.

In 363 Nisibis, Ephrem’s home town, was ceded to the Sassanian [Persian] empire, so that he moved to Edessa, where he set up a school. While he was there he was active in plague and famine relief. In Nisibis, Ephrem wrote his first compilation, the ‘Nisibene Hymns,’ but the majority of his writings come from his time in Edessa. Ephrem died in 373.

The Syriac language is a dialect of Aramaic, the language of Jesus in Palestine, and his work is deeply influenced by Aramaic and Jewish literary forms, but his imagery is very different.

There are poems about the various seasons and festivals of the church, nativity, resurrection; and about baptism, faith, Paradise virginity etc. The writing is somewhat dense, and is best read with an introduction and commentaries on the poems themselves: one recommendation is a book published by Aquila, and available from Amazon, entitled ‘The harp of the spirit,’ which is the honorific the church given to Ephrem. The book is by Sebastian Brock, who is the leading expert on the poet.

The book explains aspects of Syrian worship and typology that might fox some theology students; but in poetic form such intellectually derived reservations can disappear. Rowan Williams often spoke about the importance of using poetry to put across ideas that might otherwise seem difficult. It is also the case that western Christians, and philosophers, for that matter, are becoming increasingly aware of the undue emphasis our tradition has placed on intellectually derived formulations; something eastern traditions have gone in for rather less. Ephrem writes:

‘If, our knowledge cannot even achieve knowledge of itself how does it dare investigate the birth of him who knows all things?

How can the servant, who does not properly know himself, pry into the nature of his maker?’

Ephrem also wrote a commentary on the ‘Diatessaron, ’a harmony of the four Gospels written by Tatian, possibly a student in Rome of JUSTYN, who returned to Syria having found the philosophical approach to religion unsatisfactory. Late in the 4th century copies of the Diatessaron were destroyed as a matter of policy, and the four Gospels substituted, but Ephrem’s commentary on it was in general use until then.

If you are a lover of poetry please do yourself a favour!!

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We probably think of BARNABAS as Paul’s partner in evangelism with whom he had a falling out over John Mark, but there’s a lot more both to Barnabas and to the quarrel than that. The Greek word for the row is the one from which we derive the word ‘paroxysm! ‘So we can conclude that the fur fairly flew.

‘Beware the anger of the patient man!’ Barnabas’s real name was Joseph: the disciples named him Barnabas, ‘Son of Encouragement’. It’s a nickname that tells us something about his personality and how his peers experienced him. He is described early in Acts [last verse in ch4] as a Levite from Cyprus, who sold a field he owned and laid the money at the apostles’ feet.’

After Paul’s conversion, it’s Barnabas who brings him to Jerusalem, and vouches for him before the apostles there as having undergone a change of heart, and proved himself an able preacher. So at this stage Barnabas is the senior of the two. Next ‘Barnabas and Saul’ leave Jerusalem and go with John Mark to Antioch.

At ch13 we are told that there were ‘prophets and teachers’ in Antioch, who fasted and prayed and waited for the Spirit’s guidance as to what to do. Reading the list of names, Barnabas is first; Saul last. James C Dunn suggests that Barnabas may have been the steady pair of hands; so it looks as though the first missionary journey that we think of as Paul’s, was intended by the church as an apprenticeship for him under the care and supervision of the more reliable and experienced Barnabas.

Their journey is a success: the group meets with the Roman governor of Cyprus who is interested to learn, but the work of evangelism is interfered with by a ‘sorcerer.’ Paul demonstrates his charisma by prophesying that Elymas will be struck blind; and when this follows on, the governor is convinced. This is taking ‘ad hominem’ abuse up a notch or two, and arguably Paul – and this is where Luke changes his name – is out of order on two counts; firstly that he’s lost his self-control, and secondly because he’s taken an initiative that Luke clearly approves, but which has rather usurped Barnabas’s leadership.

What we’re confronted with here is a concrete instance of something that has bedevilled the church ever since; the difficulty of containing the necessary dynamic of individual charisma within the equally necessary maintenance of order and structure within the church.

It’s in Galatians, perhaps Paul’s earliest letter, that we find him re-living some of his fights and grudges whilst, at ch5 v12, ably demonstrating his inability to know when to stop when he writes that he wishes his opponents over circumcision would go the whole hog and castrate themselves. When he writes of ‘opposing Peter to his face,’ he’s shaking his fist. Elsewhere in Galatians he’s rather more than ambiguous about ascribing any prestige or moral authority to the Jerusalem church, and if, as seems likely, Luke has chosen to edit his account of the struggle Paul had to maintain his deeply held principle of shared table fellowship, we can sympathise with Paul.

On the one hand, in Acts ch15, Luke describes the famous council of Jerusalem as a pretty orderly affair at which views are exchanged courteously, a compromise is made, and Paul and Barnabas are entrusted with a letter to the church of Antioch, accompanied by two young ‘prophets, Silas and Judas, who are there to explain and amplify the intention of the letter.

If, as Dunn suggests, there had been a second meeting that Luke omits, between the missionaries and another party of judaizers resulting in both Peter and Barnabas being persuaded to side against Paul in the matter of table fellowship, then the relationship between the two protagonists had already been seriously compromised, and what came out supposedly over the choice of John Mark could easily have proved the last straw.

What the fight seems to be about is power: at Lycaonia the crowd mistake the pair for pagan gods; Paul is named Hermes ‘because he’s the chief speaker.’ Barnabas is named Zeus, chief of the gods! Ironically, of course, most of the later authenticated letters of Paul find him struggling, in turn, to maintain some kind of church order, particularly in Corinth.

Luke is writing in a broad-brush way about the spread of the early church, of which Paul was the chief protagonist, so, quite understandably, the role of Barnabas and other side-men of Paul’s become bit-part players. This viewpoint tends to diminish these important people, rather than magnify the achievements of the truly great. The reality is, however, every general needs to proceed from a secure base, and while the generals get their names in lights for good or ill, its people like Barnabas who are necessary to hold the spiritual fort. If that was how God purposed the part of Barnabas in his work, it’s important to acknowledge that he carried it out in a thoroughly exemplary fashion: would you have cared to be mentoring Paul?

We have one more reference to Barnabas in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, but a kind reference in Colossians ch4 v10 strongly indicates that there must have been a reconciliation. As there exist grave doubts, however, as to the authenticity of Colossians we just have to go on hoping.

Tradition has it that Barnabas was martyred in Cyprus in the year 61.