8TH JUNE THOMAS KEN [1637-1711]

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] where he upset Mary’s husband the future William III: when one of his courtiers seduced one of Mary’s maids Thomas gave them pastoral counsel and married them quietly without asking the royal permission: Thomas came back to England where he was taken on as Chaplain to Charles II, who probably expected to get lenient treatment for his adulterous relationships. This may have been so for all we know, but when Nell Gwyn needed lodging during her visit to the king, Charles asked Thomas to open his house to accommodate her, which he refused. Charles evidently held no grudge, and in 1684 he appointed ‘little Ken who refused little Nell a lodging’ as Bishop of Bath & Wells 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: for about 18 months James worked closely on this with the Quaker William Penn.

Seven bishops objected to this measure, known as the repeal of the Test Acts, not, apparently because they were against religious toleration, but because it was handled in an unconstitutional way[?] These seven bishops, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, were arrested and taken to the tower. At their trial for seditious libel the jury acquitted them, and crowds cheered them on their release.

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.

William III may have been one of the least popular of our monarchs, and he had already fallen out with Thomas, but it must be said that he proposed to parliament that he might rule as regent with Mary as Queen, or that the bishops might be absolved from taking the oath of allegiance, but parliament were not having it, so the bishops were deprived of their livings, together with 400 more clergy who also refused to swear.

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, who 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, their resentment and isolation brought fresh quarrels amongst themselves, so that any contribution to Christian unity they may have made must have been 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 devotional classics in addition to the ‘Manual of Prayer for Winchester Scholars’ of 1695, which contains several well-known hymns.

Here is 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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9TH JUNE COLUMBA [521-97]

Few enough facts are known about the life of Columba to fill one paragraph. He was born in Ireland probably in 521, having descended from two important bards. He studied with them and probably at two monastic schools, and his parents gave him a castle at Derry.

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.

Columba evangelised for 15 years in Ireland, founding several monasteries including that at Kells, before a war between his clan and that of King Diarmaid forced him to leave Ireland, he and 12 kinsmen made a coracle of wicker with a hide roof, and made it to Iona in about 561 and established an abbey, built of stones and wood, from whence he set out with the intention of evangelising pagan Scotland and strictly speaking re-convert northern England, with Romanised Christianity having either disappeared or seriously degenerated.

For two years he preached to the local mainland folk who were mainly Irish and many had a vestigial Christian background, but he is said to have mourned his exile and once he had built his monastery he chose a cell facing away from his home country.

Having already covered much of Scotland and Pictland, Columba went to the castle of King Brude at Inverness, seeking permission to settle permanently on Iona as his base, and to conduct further missions. Permission was granted and having heard the gospel message, Columba was allowed to evangelise around Loch Ness, Skye and Kintyre.

He returned to Ireland several times and, having already founded monasteries in Durrow and Derry Columba settled in Iona where he was visited by many people seeking spiritual counsel. He led a very harshly ascetic life which he was keen that his disciples should follow; fine for somebody who, according to tradition, was a giant of a man with enormous strength. As he grew old, however, he became somewhat more realistic, and lived quietly, writing poetry and supposedly copying no less than 300 gospels. He died on Iona either in 592 or 597.

It was his kinsman Adomnan, born 30 years after Columba’s death, who wrote his hagiography, so it is not entirely clear how much of the missionary work was actually conducted by Columba himself, and the whole story is caught up with the welter of Celtic myth that became modish a few decades ago.

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.

Whatever authentic spirituality the ’Celtic’ church of modern times has undoubtedly managed to inject into contemporary theology and practice, the church imported onto the mainland by Columba and his disciples lacked organisational depth and its followers in Northumbria found themselves unable to compete with power and structure of the Roman Rite imported by Augustine and championed in the north by the Anglo-Saxon ‘princes’ Wilfrid and Benedict Biscop.

There are, quite simply, insufficient documents extant for us to have any real notion of how things worked on the ground, but 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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9TH JUNE EPHREM OF SYRIA [306-73]

Ephrem the Syrian will be a total surprise for most of us. He is esteemed the most significant of the church fathers in the Syrian tradition and declared Doctor of the Church by Pope Benedict XV in 1920. Not only is he celebrated as the brightest star of an illustrious constellation of Syrian religious poets, but the greatest poet of the early church; equalled as a theological poet only by Dante: that is a whole lot of superlatives, and yet his work was not even translated into Latin until the 1920’s.

When we think of Orthodox Christianity it is the Greek and Russian traditions that come to mind, but, particularly after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 a number of churches split off from Constantinople, whose homes are in east Africa and the middle east; precisely those churches that feature on the news in our time whose very survival is being threatened by wars and Islamic extremism.

Fortunately, Ephrem lived and died before these tragic schisms, so that all of the Syrian churches are happy to avail themselves of his work. His ‘Canticles of the Seasons [of the church]’ are still used as part of the Syrian Orthodox liturgy.

As with Columba and so many of the early saints, there is plenty of legend around his life and drilling down to fact is difficult.

Ephrem was born to Christian parents at in 306 at Nisibis, a town in Mesopotamia at the extreme eastern edge of the Roman empire. The town had a lively Christian tradition, and Ephrem came under the influence of its famous Bishop James of Nisibis, and is said to have accompanied him, as deacon, to the Council of Nicaea in 325.

Ephrem was head of the Cathedral school at Nisibis when Emperor Julian, known as ‘The Apostate,’ was killed in battle against the forces of the Persian king Shapur II in 363, and Ephrem wrote a poem in which he triumphed over the body of the ‘great man’ who did what he could to destroy Christian faith; not, perhaps, something that would be appreciated in quite the same way today.

As part of a humiliating defeat, Emperor Jovian ceded five eastern provinces to Persia, including Nisibis, so that the Christian population dispersed, and Ephrem made his way to Edessa, another lively centre of Christian intellectual ferment, and it was here, during the last ten years of his life, that he encountered proponents of the various heretical sects and competing religions that were troubling Christian orthodoxy at the time: Marcionists, Gnostics, Arians and Manicheans, not to mention pagans and Jews.

Ephrem wrote many Bible commentaries including one on the Diatessaron, a harmonisation of the four Gospels written originally by Tatian, who may have been a pupil of Justyn Martyr. Copies of this document were gathered up and burned as a matter of policy when the four Gospels were accepted into the canon, and the only copy of this exists in an Armenian translation. Ephrem wrote many treatises against Christian heresies.

What he discovered was that the heresiarchs were writing lyrics which they set to popular tunes which helped promote their various causes and in time Ephrem decided to fight fire with fire, and write his own poems and train a cohort of women to sing them in churches, which may have been the first instance of officially sanctioned hymn-singing in church. Many of these hymns were translated into Greek, where they are still in use: one or two have even made their way into the English Hymnal.

Ephrem never became a monk nor a hermit, although his ascetic way of life is well authenticated. When he arrived at Edessa he settled in a cave nearby, and such was his reputation that people came to visit.

There are legends concerning Ephrem’s journey to Caesarea to meet Basil the Great, its bishop, and his brother Gregory of Nyssa, himself a very great poet. Both men recorded Ephrem’s visit, and were impressed, as was Jerome, reading his writings years after Ephrem’s death.

Ephrem’s reputation for holiness and asceticism placed him into an extraordinary position of trust and responsibility when a famine occurred at Edessa. Rich people had barns full of grain, but would not open them because they feared theft, corruption and extortion, and it was Ephrem who offered his services as supervisor that broke the impasse. He handled huge sums of money and oversaw distribution of the grain so that thousands of lives were saved. He returned to his cave and died a month later, on 9th October 373.

There is a large volume of Ephrem’s poetry – ‘the Nisibene hymns’ that were written before he moved to Edessa, but the majority of his writings, both poetry and prose, come from his last ten years in Edessa.

 The Syriac language is a dialect of Aramaic, the language of Jesus in Palestine, and his work is deeply influenced by Hebrew literary forms and devices such as the parallelisms we find in the Psalms, and antitheses, but it is from the Syriac tradition that Ephrem draws his wide use of religious symbolism, which needs to be explained by an editor or commentator for the reader to understand the richness and depth of the writing. The poems cover the various seasons and festivals of the church; a good deal about Mary, and several about the virtues, but the writing is dense and, like Dante and Shakespeare, require time, patience and an open mind to be enjoyed to the full.

Ephrem had little time or patience, himself, with excessive curiosity and analysis in a field where simple faith should suffice: he 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?

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.

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11TH JUNE BARNABAS

We probably think of Barnabas as Paul’s lieutenant with whom he had a falling out about the former’s cousin John Mark, but there is a lot more to it 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’ 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 is 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 happens 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 from Saul – is out of order on two counts; firstly, that he has lost self-control, and secondly, he has taken an initiative that Luke clearly approves, but which has rather upstaged Barnabas’s leadership.

What we are 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.

What the fight seems to be about is power: at Laconia 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 church order, particularly in Corinth.

It is 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, writing that his opponents over circumcision might go the whole hog and castrate themselves! When he writes of ‘opposing Peter to his face,’ the expression in context means ‘shaking his fist’. Elsewhere in Galatians Paul is rather more than ambiguous about ascribing any prestige or moral authority to the Jerusalem church, so we can conclude that that he had a strong ‘sense of self.’

On the other hand, and somewhat against the odds at the time, history and theology have proved Paul right in his determination to move the faith away from its Jewish roots, which, besides doing away with aspects of Kashrut and circumcision, also freed everybody within the church to share the important bonding of table fellowship and it is not clear to what extent Barnabas went all the way along with Paul in this: he was, after all, a Levite.

It is always worth going back to Philippians ch3 to understand once more exactly what a leap in the dark Paul took in order to arrive where we find him, but it was another thirty years before the schism between the older faith and its offshoot became ‘official.’ At times Paul was virtually alone with his foresight.

On the one hand, in Acts ch15, Luke describes the famous council of Jerusalem as a somewhat 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 Silas and Judas, who are there to explain and amplify the intention of the letter.

If, however, 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, it is easy to see that some bad feeling had already existed between Paul and Barnabas to which the dispute over John Mark proved to be the last straw.

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: we just go on hoping. Tradition has it that Barnabas was martyred in Cyprus in the year 61.

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 sidemen 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, however, is that while the generals get their names in lights for good or ill, people like Barnabas hold the spiritual fort. Who would have wanted the task of mentoring Paul?