WHEN THE SAINTS …

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4th AUGUST JEAN-BAPTISTE VIANNEY

ST JEAN-BAPTISTE VIANNEY is better known as ‘LE CURE D’ARS,’ of whom books and plays have been written. He is the patron saint of those who struggle to achieve their goals, but, perhaps more importantly, he’s the patron saint of the parish priest.

Born in a small country village in France in 1786, Jean-Baptiste spent his youth as a shepherd on his father’s farm, and, with the French revolution in process, he had to learn about his religion and practise his devotions secretly.

At age 17, round about 1803, he experienced a calling to become a priest, but he had no education, and because the lessons were in Latin, he had to take additional coaching in Latin as well. In 1813 he entered the seminary, and had to struggle both with his poor Latin and with the training; in 1815 he was finally ordained, and spent two years as a curate.

In 1818 he was sent to an out-of-the-way village called D’Ars, where, he was warned, there was neither religion nor love, and that it would be his job to bring both. Through Eucharistic adoration, extraordinary penances and tireless work he gradually won over his parishioners.

What should be plain enough already is that Jean-Baptiste must have had some extraordinary qualities in order to get himself accepted for ordination with no perceptible education attainment; and once arrived in his new parish he ‘turned it round,’ to use the jargon, and had people flocking to him to hear his sermons and eventually to confess to him.

His fame spread very quickly, and people travelled to see and hear him from all over France. He would preach a sermon at 11 in the morning and sometimes be hearing confessions for anything up to 16-18 hours a day: people waited sometimes days to see him.

It is not clear exactly how Jean-Baptiste brought about such a transformation: he was certainly a holy man, and lived a holy life which initially hostile parishioners grew to respect, but, of course, at this time, when things began to settle down after the excesses of the revolution, perhaps, as happens so often when the powers that be try to supress religion, people simply reverted to being their best selves, and responded without defensive cynicism to what they recognised in their priest as authentic love and holiness.

He died in August 1859 and was canonised by Pope Pius XI in 1925 Jean–Baptiste - used to pass the credit for any miracles that happened onto a girl he called his little Saint Philomena; and at one time there were so many miracles that he had to ask her to stop working!

There is a community of Sisters of St Jean Vianney who undertake charitable works.

In 2010 Pope Benedict declared St Jean Vianney to be the patron saint of all priests; interesting, in view of his exceptionally poor level of educational attainment, but a very deep and humbling message for all clergy who may feel it sufficient to be able to disguise a lack of essential personal qualities behind an ability to blind parishioners with complex theology: many DDO’s and those serving on panels whose job it is to discern vocations would do better, occasionally, to be aware of the difference between knowledge and wisdom.

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5th AUGUST KING OSWALD

KING OSWALD of NORTHUMBRIA is featured in the first three chapters of our friend BEDE’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People and church.

Himself a very holy and charitable man, Bede reports that he and his retinue were preparing to take a meal of rich food on a silver platter when a servant came in and told Oswald that a group of poor people were begging outside his palace, so that he ordered that the dinner and the dish should be given to them.

There is so much material in Bede concerning the Anglo-Saxon saints of the 7th century, in particular, that it would really be worth your buying a good paperback copy of the book, but do get one with an index or chapter headings!

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6TH AUGUST THE TRANSFIGURATION

THE TRANSFIGURATION of Jesus together with Moses and Elijah is recounted in the synoptic Gospels as an event in time: Jesus has taken his three closest disciples to the top of a mountain; there they receive a unique and truly transformative experience, when they return ‘to Earth’ life has been ‘going on as ever’ that is badly, as Benjamin, the lazy cynical donkey of ‘Animal Farm’ could have predicted.

Whilst it is essential for the reader that the account of the transfiguration be narrated as an episode in its place and time, the experience itself is, in reality, intended to convey a truth quite outside the dimension of time; and it is perhaps for this reason that real life is presented to us via both Jesus and the disciples with such devastating contrast afterwards.

Moses, the greatest of the prophets and [supposedly] author of the entire Torah, ascends a mountain to be given God’s Ten Commandments: he has to veil his face on his way down in case its unearthly shining frightens the onlookers. He is the prototype of the mystic in pursuit of God for himself, as opposed to God as the provider of benefits and blessings, and he appears to Moses – or, rather, his back appears to Moses – as light and fire.

Elijah, as we saw when looking at the birth of John the Baptist, was believed to have been carried into heaven by a chariot of fire; and it was hoped and believed that his return would signal the coming of the Messiah, which is why John the Baptist is quizzed by the Jerusalem big wigs as to who he says he is, and whether he is, in fact, Elijah returning to Earth.

The other Hebrew concept we don’t hear about very much as Christians is the Shekinah; the ‘locus’ on earth of God’s glory, which traditionally resided in the sanctuary of the Temple and occurs in various stories in the Old Testament, but not always in the form of light. In the simplest possible terms, then, the meaning of the transfiguration is God’s affirmation, by means of the Shekinah, of Jesus as his Messiah, together with the principal prophets, intended to confirm to the three disciples present that, as John’s Gospel makes clearer, perhaps, the principal focus of the Father’s presence has been transferred from the sanctuary of the Temple, and onto the person of Jesus.

There is a thoroughly practical message in the story as recounted in the Gospels: when the disciples come to Earth, they do so in every sense of the expression. They’re not allowed to wallow in the experience they’ve just undergone; life is happening and Jesus is needed urgently, because things have, indeed, been going badly.

The impression one carries away here is that Jesus is as thoroughly exasperated with life on Earth as any one of us might be, for instance, on returning from holiday or retreat only to find our house had been burgled! For us it’s a lesson in humility and self-acceptance: during time away from the reality of life our feet may have left the ground, and it’s almost a blessing in itself when something happens to foist reality back in our faces.

Jesus gets down to business and explains later to the disciples who have been left behind that they were, after all, not really at fault at all. On the surface it simply looks like Jesus not quite able to effect the necessary transition from spiritual top gear to slamming on the breaks: perhaps, also, the Evangelists is signalling that the God-man has re-entered [merely] human existence?

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7th AUGUST JOHN MASON NEALE

JOHN MASON NEALE was born in London, the son of a clergyman, in 1818, and died in 1866 aged 48.

Although he was probably the finest scholar of his year at Trinity College Cambridge, he was unable to sit for an honours degree because of his poor mathematics. At age 22 Neale became Chaplain of Downing College. He was ordained in 1842, and became Rector at Crawly very briefly, but had to resign due to chronic lung disease. The following winter he was compelled to live abroad for his health.

The John Mason after whom Neale was named, was a puritan hymn-writer of whom Neale’s mother Susanna was a descendant, but Neale himself was very much associated with high churchmanship and fell under the influence of the Oxford Movement.

Apart from his fame as hymn-writer and translator of early and mediaeval Greek, Russian, Syrian and Latin hymns, he was also interested in church architecture and did what he could by means of the Ecclesiastical Society, which he helped to found, with its aim, to increase people’s awareness of image and formal religious ornament in churches: he was closely associated with the Gothic revival.

In 1846 Neale became Warden of Sackville College, an alms house, an appointment he kept until his death.

In 1853 Neale co-founded the Society of St Margaret, a religious order dedicated to looking after the sick; but many Protestants were suspicious of any kind of religious order in the Anglican Church, and in 1857, at the funeral of one of the sisters, he was attacked and mauled: crowds threatened to stone him or to burn his house.

He received no honour or preferment during his life: His Doctorate of Divinity was awarded later by an American university. Neale was also the principal founder of the Anglican & Eastern Association, which became the Anglican & Eastern Orthodox Association in 1864. The result of this organisation was ‘The Hymns of the Eastern Church,’ edited by Neale and published in 1865.

Neale’s determined high churchmanship attracted opposition, including a 14-year inhibition by his bishop, but he translated the Eastern Liturgy, and wrote a mystical commentary on the Psalms; but his contribution to the church of today is as a hymn-writer and translator of a number of Greek, Russian, Syrian and Latin hymns, 58 of which appeared in Hymns Ancient and Modern in the 1875 edition, and 63 The English Hymnal Of 1906.

Among his best-known translations are:

* A great and mighty wonder
* O come O come Emanuel
* Of the Father’s love begotten
* All glory laud and honour
* Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle
* To thee before the close of day
* Ye sons and daughters of the King

The melody of ‘Good King Wenceslas, which Neale unearthed originates from a Latin springtime poem ‘Tempus Adest Floridum.’

John Mason Neale seems to have achieved a great deal for the wider church during a short and rather sad life, disadvantaged as he was by poor health, early academic set-backs and quite unreasoning opposition not only from crowds, from whom it may have been anticipated, but by a bishop who, perhaps, found him awkward to pigeon-hole.