14TH JULY JOHN KEEBLE 1792-1866

JOHN KEEBLE is perhaps best known as one of the poster-boys for the Anglo-Catholic revival in the middle c19, [together with John Henry Newman and Edward Pusey] but should probably be better known and celebrated as the author of hymns such as ‘Blest are the pure in heart,’ and ‘New every morning.’

His other distinction was his ‘Assizes sermon’ preached to the top brass in the legal profession to remind them of the country’s Christian heritage, and to exhort them to maintain standards of justice along Christian principles. This sermon has been taken by church historians to be the trumpet blast of what is known as the Oxford Movement, or the ‘Tractarians;’ a small caucus of clergy from the middle C19 who issued over 100 ‘tracts’ about various theological and social issues, mainly of a conservative nature. Keeble wrote seven of them, together with a treatise on the Eucharist.

Keeble was the son of a priest, also named John Keeble. He and his brother were educated at home by their father John, but John the younger proved such a brilliant scholar that he became a Fellow of Oriel College Oxford at age 19. His book of poetry ‘The Christian Year’ [1827], which went through three hundred editions in C19, was widely admired, and earned him the professorship of poetry at Oxford. He also co-edited important books on the church fathers and Richard Hooker’s ‘Laws of Ecclesiastical polity.’

What is completely admirable in Keeble’s life is his avoidance of public office and preferment in the church. In the 1830’s he was offered three posts but declined them on the grounds that he needed to stay with his widowed father. After his father’s death Keeble became parish priest at a church near Winchester, where he stayed until his death in 1866.

Given the influence and fame Keeble achieved outside the church, especially as a writer, he could easily have risen within the church electing, thereby, to build on his fame, but he was known to be rather shy, although it is said that when he was with his friends he could be at ease, and something of a wit.

Regardless of issues of theology and churchmanship, what makes a saint is holiness of life, and, by all accounts, Keeble was universally admired for his holiness.

God’s church needs dynamism, and the interaction of opposing views and passions: how else can it stay alive; but the life of John Keeble seems to have been a model of how to express one’s views without the hectoring, bullying and shoulder-barging that has mired the church and its reputation right back to some of the best-known fathers, and arguably even to St Paul.

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15TH JULY BONAVENTURE 1217-20-1274

Even ‘reliable’ printed sources vary considerably in assigning dates for Bonaventure’s life.

BONAVENTURE – ‘the seraphic doctor,’ is a major figure in church history, as theologian of equal standing with Thomas Aquinas; philosopher and mystic – an unusual combination of talents – but perhaps principally as the remarkable administrator regarded as the second founder of the Franciscan Order whose quest for love and harmony among its contending forces flowed out into the whole church. His insights into the Trinity and Christology qualified him to negotiate with representatives of the Eastern Church in an attempt to repair the 200-year-old schism that had torn it apart from Rome. His importance and stature have only been explored and appreciated comparatively recently.

BACKGROUND: THE FRANCISCANS AFTER FRANCIS

It has been perceptively pointed out that if it was a miracle of grace that one man could live as St Francis did, what chance was there for a thousand?

The earliest Franciscan friars had to earn a living, just as Jesus had in early life, and Paul throughout his ministry, at least while he was a free man: at first begging was very much a last resort, but if a friar could earn enough to feed himself by working as a day labourer somewhere and sleeping rough in barns or unused ovens this was poverty as understood from the New Testament.

Of course, the ‘Poor Clares’ could not live like this, and their struggle to maintain the Franciscan charism of ‘holy poverty’ followed a different pattern. Furthermore, Francis had founded a third order of ordinary men and women living at home in the world, who could not possibly support their families in the way the early friars had lived: things had to change.

The earliest Franciscans were not educated men, and Francis had a down on books and learning, but in time educated men joined the Order and needed books. Similarly, none of the original friars were priests, but in time some priests joined up, and saying Mass involved all the appropriate paraphernalia, so some property became necessary, and after the Pope had ‘incorporated’ the Order it was inevitable that the original ‘holy simplicity’ would be compromised.

These changes were actually the result of success, with people joining from all walks of life, not to mention the geographical spread of the order which brought fresh problems attendant on living in different climates and environment for which Francis had made no provision. Nevertheless, some of the original disciples were uncomfortable with these changes but by now things were out of their control.

* It was in 1209 that the original primitive order was approved by Innocent III,
* A Cardinal Protector was appointed to keep the Order in touch with the papal curia.
* There grew a form of government within the Order itself; a general chapter meeting regularly to deal with problems throughout the Order.
* Local groups developed to discuss problems that arose in their own geographical areas.
* There was an unsuccessful rule formulated in 1221 that was never approved either by the friars themselves or the Pope.
* The rule that is still in force today was approved in 1223.
* On his deathbed, however, Francis had dictated a ‘testament’, recounting his conversion, his vision for the Order and how he wished it to continue after his death. At the end of this Francis enjoins his followers:

‘I strictly command all my cleric and lay brothers, through obedience, not to pace any gloss upon the Rule, or any gloss upon these words; but as the Lord has given me to speak and write the Rule and these words, simply and purely, you may understand them without gloss and observe them with a holy activity until the end.’

So Francis rather muddied the waters by insisting that the order he had founded should remain much as it had at the beginning: he died in 1226 leaving his followers in confusion. Some of the precepts in the Testament were even more rigorous than the original rule so with the best will in the world two incipient ‘tendencies’ grew up.

For all the reluctance of Francis’ followers to get the Pope involved in all this, in 1230, only four years after Francis’ death, Pope Honorius IV ruled that in whatever reverence the Testament should be held by the brothers, it was the Rule that should be adhered to in holy obedience.

Nobody taken into consideration that the brothers would grow old and need support: where would they be housed, and where would priests celebrate mass? Francis was vehemently determined that none of his followers should even touch money!

One group, the so-called ‘Conventuals,’ argued that as long as the spirit of Francis’ charism was maintained it would be safe to adapt to necessities, while others, known later as the ‘Spirituals,’ insisted with some justification that to deal in money was in itself to forsake the Rule: ‘Today a coin; tomorrow a house …’ and they were right. Once the order obtained buildings, a critic observed that ‘all they lack now is wives. [You’re dispensing with poverty and obedience, so why maintain chastity!!!]

A line had to be drawn as to what constituted poverty, and the Pope needed to rule on this too, and a system was set up whereby the Papacy took over responsibility for ownership of property that the Franciscan Order needed in order to function at all.

This arrangement became a problem with the growth of the Order because sometimes the ‘property’ they administered could be somewhat grander than that of the local parish clergy, who also found that they were losing business to the Franciscans, who now said Mass in churches and attracted people and their donations: they were no longer helping the church but taking it over!

The Order now had determined opponents not only from within the church, but also from among other ‘mendicant’ orders, principally the Dominicans, who had been founded only several years after the Franciscans.

All this came to a head in the 1250’s at the Sorbonne, when a dispute between the various professors became so heated that they stopped teaching.

Both sides in this bitter quarrel sought justification in the Bible for their positions. The opponents of the Franciscans went to a text in 1st Timothy claiming that false prophets would emerge as Anti-Christ and foreshadow the end times, and that was who the Franciscans were: perhaps a modern simile would be the pigs in ‘Animal Farm’ who drive out the humans with the help of all the other animals and then gradually take over the farmer’s role. At all events they were seen by their detractors as false apostles.

The ‘Spirituals,’ who were the very shrill pressure group in this situation, took their position from an apocalyptic mystic preacher named Joachim of Fiore, who posited three ages of the church, and that in this third age of the Holy Spirit the Franciscans were the good guys who would save the world: from this the ‘Spirituals’ started to get seriously out of order, claiming that Francis had actually been Jesus himself, which was heresy, and their teachings went from bad to worse.

Perhaps what really gave the Order’s opponents their weapon was the deposition of Brother Elias, who had taken over the leadership of the Order after Francis’ death. He had been quite inept and had upset people at a time when peace, and good judgement, were most required. After his deposition he joined forces with an emperor who had been excommunicated and by so doing drew excommunication upon himself.

In 1257 the Order elected a new Minister General named BONAVENTURE VII since Francis’ death. His principal mandate was to bring peace and unity to the contending parties and to defend the Order against its many detractors from all sides.

As an administrator Bonaventure re-codified the Order’s Statutes into the ‘Constitution of Narbonne,’ but he was also commissioned to write an ‘official’ biography of Francis, and as a mystic and theologian of genius he saw this as a means of healing the wounds by composing a careful and conscientious account that sought to bring together the best of both tendencies, by gently leaving the matter of austerity and asceticism to personal discernment, stressing Francis’ virtues, particularly those of charity, humility and his ability to discern when a brother was forcing himself into more ascetic practice than he was physically able to endure.

Like the Gospels, Bonaventure’s account of Francis’ life, rather than a historical biography, is a careful selection of stories and episodes that illustrate these virtues: of the 15 chapters seven are biographical in nature, and the rest meditations on aspects of Francis’ character and spiritual development, not omitting illustrations of how he was compelled to grow into becoming what he aspired to be.

There are other more straightforwardly biographical narratives of Francis’ brief life, but this one was written to portray him as a wise and compassionate spiritual director who could discern the individual needs of each of his disciples to discover their very own path to fulfilling the rule and the charism.

In 1273 when he was made a Cardinal, Bonaventure relinquished his position as Minister General, and for all his efforts to bring harmony among the contending forces of economic necessity, ideology and suspicion from the world, things fell apart again after his death: the fiction that the Order’s actual possessions belonged to the Pope was no long-term solution, and disputes continued among factions of the Order. The ‘Spirituals’ were eventually anathematised by Pope John XXII early in the 14th century, and he refused to continue taking responsibility for what was, in effect, the Order’s considerable property portfolio. By this time, however, God had provided two more Franciscan big hitters in John Duns Scotus and the feisty William of Ockham. … … …

BONAVENTURE’S LIFE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Giovanni di Fidenza was born at Bagnoreggio, near Orvieto, 50 miles north of Rome, between 1217 and 1220, the son of a physician. when, as a child, he was seriously ill his mother made a vow to St Francis, who prayed over him and interceded for him on several other occasions. The story goes that Francis wished the boy ‘Bon Aventura’ [=good luck!] which became a nickname which he adopted when he joined the Franciscan Order.

He attributed his recovery to Francis and asserted in adult life that the Saint had saved his life and he remained convinced that the Order had been established by Christ himself.

Bonaventure received his primary education at the friary at Bagnoreggio, and proceeded to Paris where, between 1236 and 1242 he studied at the Faculty of Arts, joining the Franciscan Order in 1243, when he took the name of Bonaventure. Between 1243 and 1248 he studied theology and from then until 1257, as Bernard McGinn puts it, he ascended the academic ladder, becoming in 1252 Principal Teacher of the Franciscans at the Sorbonne; at this time each of the major orders had their own teaching faculties and boarding facilities attached to the university.

In 1254 Bonaventure became Master of Theology and a Professor at the entire university. It was during these last nine years [1248-57] that he wrote his major theological works, but his 21-year career in Paris finished when, in 1257, he was elected as the seventh Minister General of the ‘Friars Minor’ which he virtually re-founded, giving it a training and administration that it had not previously known; but attempting to keep it faithful to the founder’s ideals. [see BACKGROUND].

In 1273 the Pope created Bonaventure Cardinal Bishop of Albano and ordered him to accept the appointments, and the story goes that he kept the Papal Legates waiting while he finished washing the dishes and would not meet them until the last one was dry.

At the Council of Lyons in 1274 Bonaventure worked to heal the schism between eastern and western churches, which had been 200 years previously, but the following year, on 15th July, he died at Lyons, during the Council itself. He was not canonised until 1488 and waited another century before being declared Doctor of the Church.

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church states that Bonaventure was slow than Thomas Aquinas to swallow the new fashion for Aristotelian logic although he did not reject it wholly, but simply believed that the most important resource for the theologian was ‘Scripture. Bernard McGinn, the expert on Christian mysticism, asserts that Bonaventure is one of the most important theologians in the entire church; evidence of how scholars are still in process of discovering his value.

‘Scripture illuminates the world and possesses the power to restore it to all of the knowledge, praise and love of God.

‘The purpose of theology is that we become virtuous and attain salvation. This is accomplished by an inclination of the will, rather than naked speculation.’

‘In the “Liber Creaturae” [the book of CREATURES[!]” which was offered to Adam & Eve for their guidance, God communicated efficaciously; when Adam & Eve abandoned their innocence, they lost the power to read this book clearly. Divine providence then saw fit to supply the further testimony of another book; the “Liber Scripturae”, which was written in accordance with divine inspiration.’

As Minister General of the Franciscan Order, Bonaventure maintained his predecessor’s policy regarding the selection of friars to be sent for training in theology at Paris: ‘They should be of good reputation; meek and peaceful among their confreres.’

‘Novi theologi often dread the scripture itself claiming it to be as confusing, disordered and uncharted as an impenetrable forest.’ For this reason, he yielded to his students’ request for guidance, and wrote his ‘Breviloquium,’which explores the theology of the Trinity, the creation, the fall, the Incarnation, grace, the sacraments and the last judgment. He underlines the pivotal role of Jesus Christ in redeeming and perfecting the created order.

‘What greater act of benevolence than for the master to redeem the slave by taking the nature of a slave? This is a deed of such unfathomable goodness that no greater proof of mercy, benevolence and friendship can be imagined. …. The ‘Deus-homo’ becomes humanity’s neighbour, brother, friend and teacher; and gives himself in the Passion as the price of redemption … The perfection of the creation is matched by that of the redeemed order. …

‘As the restoring principle, [God] created humanity in an orderly fashion, so must He restore him in an orderly fashion, He must repair humanity in a way which safeguards freedom of the will, the honour of God and the order of the universe.’

Bonaventure underlines the fact that Jesus Christ suffered only once; and that his death was sufficient for all sins which lay in the past and in the future, [after Anselm.]

The body of Jesus Christ is mystically offered to the Father daily as an antidote to sin. So close is the sacrifice of the cross to that of the altar that everything in the Mass represents the Passion.

For this reason, and bearing in mind that ‘Breviloquim, is at least partly a training manual for the priesthood, his expectation as to the piety, purity and reverence of the celebrant is, perhaps, exalted well beyond what a merciful God might expect of a human who hadn’t just emerged from a 30-day retreat!!! a thorough and candid confession is enjoined, followed by a reading of Psalms 84: 5-8 and 115, with their versicles & prayers; and a mind and spirit filled with thoughts of the Passion etc.

To the aspiring theologian he warns that:

‘the reader should not believe that reading is sufficient without unction; speculation without devotion; investigation without wonder; observation without rejoicing; work without piety; knowledge without love; understanding without humility; endeavour without divine grace.’

‘In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, he is the central point of understanding’ [as the Word.]

Bonaventure concludes that: ‘the human thirst for knowledge must be subordinated to the search for wisdom and holiness.’

Two very much more accessible works of Bonaventure are his ‘Journey of the soul into God,’ [1259, and ‘The spiritual journey of St Francis [1260], which [if you have passed on the Background section]is Bonaventure’s account of Francis’ ascent to God by an examination of each of his spiritual gifts and virtues.

The ‘journey’ illustrates Bonaventure’s use of philosophy, theology, numerology and mysticism in precisely the way he has already advocated in the quotations above. God has left ‘vestiges’ of himself in nature, in the human mind, and in Scripture, by which Bonaventure plots a series of steps related to the supposed six days of creation. At the Sabbath, the pilgrim is compelled to put every use of the mind to one side and simply rest faithfully IN GOD: It’s a formulation that could just as easily bring seekers to God in our own time, and the book is short and accessible.

As a Franciscan, with his love of the created order, and his conviction of its goodness, Bonaventure strongly opposed ascetical practices, and the notion, prevalent among some heretics in southern France at the time, that purification and purgation could only be attained by setting aside ‘the world and the flesh:’ he maintained that the Franciscan precept of poverty was simply a matter of living without unnecessary possessions.

By virtually re-founding the Franciscan Order, Bonaventure had rooted it in the church and the world and saved it from fracturing beyond repair. His theology, mysticism and holiness of life earned him the soubriquet of ‘The seraphic Doctor:’ One of his teachers, Alexander of Hales, said: ‘In him, it is as though Adam never sinned.’

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16TH JULY OSMUND d.1099

OSMUND came to England with William the Conqueror, who was his uncle: his mother being William’s half-sister. He had already been William’s chancellor in Normandy for two years before the conquest, and it was perfectly normal either for a ruler to employ a prelate in secular affairs, or, particularly at this time, to appoint somebody to a senior church position from secular life, because the chances are they were already in Holy Orders, so the appointment was sometimes intended virtually as a sinecure generating income that didn’t have to come from the treasury.

Bishop Odo of Bayeux, who commissioned the tapestry, is a case in point, acting as Vice Regent with Queen Matilda while William was abroad. Like many other bishops, Odo led armies against the rebels in the north of England.

Background THE CHURCH AT THE CONQUEST

The days of Bede, Willibrord, Boniface and Alcuin were long gone: their emigration onto the continent had actually created a brain drain in England which Alfred did his best to redress.

Only two Englishmen feature in our calendar in the 11th century before the conquest; Wulfstan and Edward the Confessor, both of whom had managed a measure of church reform, but Stigand, the Archbishop of Canterbury, had got himself too involved in the murky politics around King Harold and his family, and had been canonically deposed well before the conquest.

Characteristically, William the Conqueror had allowed the See to lie vacant for years so as to collect its revenues, but in August 1070, and with the help of the Pope, he finally convinced the abbot of his new foundation at Caen, the Italian scholar Lanfranc, to come over and take the English church in hand.

Lanfranc [28th of May] was a brilliant administrator who sharpened up the infrastructure of the church; changing some diocesan boundaries and creating some new ones; moving cathedrals from some of the small towns where they had been located, to prime urban centres; introducing the office of the Archdeacon to take some of the bishops’ work off their shoulders; requiring each to hold two synods per year in their dioceses, and requiring cathedral canons to stay in residence, which was new. He was somewhat more cautious about married clergy because in Normandy when required to set aside their wives, the clergy had rioted! He presided over three church councils during the early 70’s.

The building mania among the early Norman nobility benefitted the English church immeasurably: every cathedral was rebuilt in Romanesque style, and every abbey church except Westminster was rebuilt. The only cathedral that was entirely rebuilt before the reformation was at Salisbury. The only major abbey church that was left to itself by the Normans was Westminster; all the others were rebuilt too. Fortunately, this happened at a time when French architectural genius was at its height.

But Lanfranc, although he was not a Norman, shared the general feeling among the conquerors that Anglo-Saxon institutions and culture was barbarous, which affected the church in two principal ways. Firstly virtually every English bishop and abbot was replaced by a Norman, and many were given the jobs purely as rewards for loyal service, so that the lands and revenues went out of the hands of the actual foundations.

This had its effect on morale as well as some aspects of worship itself: at Glastonbury the Norman abbot failed to convince his monks to stop singing ‘Gregorian’ chant and to change to the use of Fecampe: eventually he sent armed knights into the abbey during a service, who wrought havoc in the church and slaughtered some of the monks-choirs and organists take note!!!

What probably demoralised the Anglo-Saxon subjects most was the cavalier attitude Lanfranc and his bishops adopted towards the culture of English saints. Lanfranc is reported to have remarked that from what he had seen none of these ‘saints’ seemed very saintly, and he sent commissioners round the country to abolish all English cults and replace them with those on the Roman calendar.

This is no worse, in principal, than either of the Cromwells later, but the effect was probably far more drastic in the 11th century. Relics and even bones were removed, sometimes bundled out of the church or even burned. When you think of the impact the Protestant Reformation had on church communities in mid-16th century, the shock of this loss of identity must have been similar.

Anselm persuaded Lanfranc to spare Alphege [19th of April], and Wulfstan just managed to hang onto Dunstan: Osmund, whom we celebrate today, stood up for Aldhelm [25th of May]

OSMUND, unlike the other Norman nobles, knew something about Anglo-Saxon culture, and had a particular affection for Aldhelm, who had been bishop of his own diocese in the 9th century, though based in those days at Sherborne Abbey.

In 1072 he was appointed Bishop of Salisbury and supervised the building of the cathedral at Old Sarum, which he presented to the king in 1081. After only five days the new cathedral was struck by lightning, and in face of popular feeling, no doubt, that this signalled divine disapprobation, Osmund had it rebuilt. The site of Old Sarum can still be visited near Salisbury; the cathedral we know was built in the 14th century and is the only one that had to be rebuilt since the normal era. You may remember that before the Parliamentary Reformation, Old Sarum was still a constituency sending out two MP’s and nobody lived there.

When he arrived at his See Osmund found the service books mixed up and in very poor condition. His most lasting achievement was to re-codify the liturgy for the Mass and other Sacraments ‘according to the Sarum use,’ with chant. For those interested in music history, or lovers of ‘chant’ a reconstruction of the ‘Sarum’ Mass is available on CD by the Tallis Scholars, with the readings chanted too. This ‘Sarum’ rite rather took over throughout England until the middle of the 16th century with the Reformation, but some of Merbecke’s Service for Holy Communion includes some of its melodies, and the Dominican Mass retains most of them today. The Anglican ‘Anthem’ derives its name and function from the Sarum ‘Antiphon.’

Unlike the venal, grasping, lupine and treacherous Normans whom William rewarded for loyal service, Osmund had a reputation for holiness, lacking ambition and living simply.

As William’s former chancellor, and unlike Lanfranc, Osmund was accustomed to dealing in secular matters, and had a good deal to do with the compilation of the Doomsday Book, particularly in the Midlands and north of the country.

As recorded above, Osmund unlike the new men of the conquest, was familiar with some Anglo-Saxon culture, and developed an interest and affection for Aldhelm, who had been Abbot of Sherborne, and was able to swim against the tide and save his relics and his reputation until today.

Osmund died in 1099, and his bones were translated to the Salisbury Cathedral that we know in 1457.

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