WHEN THE SAINTS …

DUNSTAN 19th

ALCUIN OF YORK 20th

ASCENSION 20th

HELENA 21st

THE WESLEYS 24th

… … … … … … … …

Dunstan, as the story goes

Once caught the Devil by his nose

With red-hot tongs, which made him roar,

That he was heard three miles or more!

Dunstan is the patron saint of silversmiths, armourers and gunsmiths and there are many such folk tales about his miracles and bargains with the Devil: his name comes up in Chaucer’s Friar’s tale. Dying in 988, and canonised in 1029, he was England’s most popular saint until overshadowed by Thomas a Becket. Although a predecessor to Thomas as Archbishop, Dunstan survived the wrath of kings to die a holy death in his bed.

He was born near Glastonbury around 909, ten years after the death of King Alfred; the son of a noble with royal blood. At that time Glastonbury was a centre of pilgrimage, popularly associated with Christian settlement in England, and the Abbey was a famous centre of learning. Dunstan was educated there before joining his uncle, Aldhelm, who is coming up next week.

He insisted that the monastic calling was not for him until a serious skin disease in his mid 30’s caused him to change his mind; so, after taking orders, he built himself a tiny cell against the walls of Glastonbury Abbey and, taking up a life of manual labour and devotion, soon discovered a talent for metalwork, making church bells and vessels. He was also musical, and is occasionally portrayed playing the harp. One of his poems is in the British Library.

After a while, the new King Edward created Dunstan Abbot of Glastonbury, where he improved standards effectively along the lines that Benedict of Aniane and the Cluniac abbots had in the rest of Western Europe. In time he was called as an adviser to King Edward, but experienced the ups and downs of court intrigue; in 955 having reproached Edward’s 16-year-old successor for immorality, he was exiled, but soon called back when a new northern king, Edgar, realised his talents, quickly made him Bishop of Worcester, where his shrine can still be seen in the Cathedral. At the death of [uncle] Aldhelm, he was created Archbishop of Canterbury, and, together with Edgar, continued restoring and reforming monastic life.

Dunstan did much to devise the coronation service for King Edgar altering the ceremony so as to emphasise the bond between church and monarch; making it a sacred act, thereby emulating the consecration of priests.

Dunstan might have remained one of those many pious respectable saints who earn canonisation almost like a civil servant getting his ‘K’ after distinguished service, but his evident popularity among ordinary folk after his death places him in another dimension altogether.

The church’s rather ‘worthy’ prayers for his day carry important aspirations for the present, so here they are:

PRAYER

O God of truth and beauty, who richly endowed your bishop Dunstan with skill in music and the working of metals; and with gifts of administration and reforming zeal: teach us, we pray, to see in you the source of all our gifts and talents, and move us to offer them for the adornment of worship and the advancement of true religion; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the holy spirit, one God, now and forever.

Almighty God, who raised up Dunstan to be a true shepherd of the flock, a restorer of monastic life and a faithful counsellor to those in authority: give to all pastors the same gifts of your Holy spirit, that they may be true servants of Christ and all his people; through Jesus Christ our Lord … … …

… … … … … … … …

ALCUIN of YORK is cited as ‘teacher of the faith, but nowhere as a saint. He was born around 735 near York, where he was educated, and eventually became principal of this important seat of learning. On his way back from Rome in 781, he encountered Charlemagne, the most powerful and prestigious ruler in Western Europe at the time, for whom he was persuaded to work as adviser for education. Presumably, like many such potentates, the emperor wished to be adorned with the additional prestige of transforming his court into a centre of culture and learning; and, in fairness, he did bring Christianity to most of the lands he conquered.

Alcuin took over the famous Palace school at Aachen, where he introduced a curriculum of the seven liberal arts, and saw to it that monasteries were kept up to the highest standards available at the time, aided by the emperor’s practice of placing some of his most learned ministers as abbots; which is how Alcuin himself lived out his final years at St Martin’s Abbey in Tours.

Alcuin never became a monk neither did he rise above deacon’s orders, but he revised the lectionary; compiled a sacramentary, and Richard Hoppin’s very authoritative survey of mediaeval music stresses the importance of Charlemagne as having taken an important hand in the reform of ‘Gregorian’ chant, presumably headed up by Alcuin. Whilst most of Charlemagne’s many achievements melted away after his death, this work on the liturgy and chant had lasting effects.

Alcuin figures in the history of philosophy as an important, though quite unoriginal thinker, but surveys of mediaeval spirituality hardly mention him at all.

It is no small thing to be a widely learned and gifted administrator, nor, for that matter, to be a lucky one, but one looks in vain for signs of extraordinary holiness of life in the text books. Standards of morality at court were by no means exalted, but unlike Dunstan, clearly Alcuin had read, learned and inwardly digested enough of the Gospel to learn a little more discretion than the Baptist in the matter of calling out erring monarchs!

‘ASCENSION’ DAY ‘

If there is one thing to disregard about the ‘ascension’ of Jesus into heaven it is the notion pedalled by artists of feet and hems disappearing into the sky at the top of the painting!

‘What goes up must come down:’ Luke reminds his readers that Jesus has promised to return by the way he has ascended: hold that thought!

All the Gospels carry accounts of resurrection appearances, Mark’s more than the rest does read like a postscript by a later hand, and is not included in some of the oldest manuscripts. The same would seem to apply to the end of Matthew whereas the conclusion of John’s Gospel has always been in doubt; but his statement that if he were to recount everything that Jesus did, he supposes that the whole world could not fill the book, gives us a clue. What both John and Luke are trying to indicate is that whatever could possibly mark the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry is far beyond human language and comprehension; THAT, SOMEHOW, Jesus has burst the bonds of human existence as we know it.

Luke the Historian and author of the ‘sequel’ to his Gospel needs to mark as clearly as possible the definitive end of his account of Jesus’ human existence, and the ineffable mystery of his passing from the ‘earthly Jesus’ to the ‘Christ of faith.’

There are slight variations in the Gospel account of the ascension, with that of Acts, and what may perhaps help us understand the theological significance of Jesus’ departure, rather than a historical account, is the idea that a ‘cloud hid him.’ If we hang onto that idea, and forget about feet disappearing into the sky, we have the gist of what Luke is trying to explain by means of the ascension of Jesus.

There is, of course, a historical dimension to all this as well. Once Luke has been able to deal definitively with the final departure of Jesus, we are brought safely into the next phase of the story, the development of the early church, but more immediately, of course, there is a hiatus during which the disciples await the promised coming of the Spirit at Pentecost; the ‘DESCENT OF THE DOVE.’

… … … … … … … …

HELENA was the mother of CONSTANTINE the GREAT, the Roman emperor who first published an edict of toleration for Christians, and later inaugurated it as the established faith throughout his territory. There is so much uncertainty about her early life that we can only hazard a guess that she was born in Greece; married, and subsequently was divorced by Constantinus, once he became emperor, and lived in obscurity until Constantine brought her back into public life on becoming emperor himself.

Helena converted to Christianity when Constantine legalised it, and it is recounted that following a dream, she undertook extensive tours of the holy places in Palestine, Syria and Egypt at a very advanced age. Having taken the best advice she could in order to discover the spot on which Jesus was crucified, she is said to have found the three crosses on which he and the two ‘thieves’ suffered. In order to ascertain which of these three the ‘true cross,’ a local was bishop had a dying woman touch all three, and when she revived at being presented with the third, the miracle was duly taken to have resolved the problem. Helena reported back to her son, the emperor, whose orders precipitated the building of several churches on these various holy spots.

Helena died at a great age in 333 and is venerated as ‘PROTECTOR OF THE holy places.’

If you go to Wikipedia you can catch up with more of the legends around Helena and the true cross.’

… … … … … … … …

‘Cometh the hour; cometh the man.’ the Wesleys and others like them filled a gap that was rapidly opening up in the C of E’s parish network, predominantly rural at the time when the industrial revolution was creating thousands of deracinated urban poor who had a crying need for the kind of hope and encouragement that the Wesleys and other revivalists were offering.

E P Thomson, son of a Methodist minister and author of ;The Making of the English working class,’ deplored the direction Methodism took under the Wesleys’ successor, Jabez Bunting, but affirms: ‘Wesley at least had been a great-hearted warhorse; he had never spared himself; he was an enthusiast who had stood up at the market-cross to be pelted.’

If you think about it, there was something of St Paul in the way John Wesley travelled around the whole of the United Kingdom, setting up a well-structured support system for converts flocking to hear him, not forgetting the redoubtable George Whitefield, who did much to help, support and encourage the work. The challenge of how to set up and run groups providing a safe environment in which people can share their experience or difficulties honestly and without feeling judged or belittled by stronger personalities is still very much a work in progress, even with training courses and manuals in group theory and practice. Wesley seems to have set up a model in which each member could speak in order, including the group facilitator, to share as honestly as possible [or practicable] aspects of their Christian formation. But … ‘the church is Corinth[!]’ and just as we read that every intractable problem or situation devolved ultimately onto Paul, Wesley made himself available as best he could, to speak with leaders and individuals between 10am and 2pm during his visits anywhere, in addition to preaching, and kept a watching brief on ‘disorderly walkers’ or ‘contentious trouble-makers.’

Those of us who have had anything to do with Alpha training will understand the limitations attendant in a system where promising new recruits are placed in positions of leadership well before they can reasonably be expected to be ready; even if searching questioners and flat disagreement need to be discouraged in the interests of the ‘greatest good for the greatest number,’ the model has been shown to produce astonishing results. In such an environment, however, what the pilgrim is bound to experience is something more akin to what we know as cognitive behavioural therapy than 1-2-1 counselling or spiritual guidance. The goal seems to be that people conform to ‘rules’ and that their inability or failure to do so can be seen as ‘disorderly walking or whatever the leaders care to term deviance.

Another aspect of this Pauline spirit is the changes of direction John was forced to undergo, as a High-Church Anglican compelled as he was to train up lay people and hand them responsibility to maintain spiritual and emotional well-being of the ‘classes’ and ‘societies’ he set up. Eventually - most difficult of all – Wesley, who insisted he remained an Anglican until his death, found it necessary to ordain new priests in the absence of episcopal oversight.

It is a cliché that Wesley never intended Methodism to become a denomination, the more so, perhaps, because there were other revivalist clergy working contentedly within the Anglican fold, but the sheer growth in its numbers and spread, the contempt and abuse Methodism received from the establishment, not to mention the splintering of this ‘church within a church’ made it inevitable, but at an enormous cost to Wesley himself, who tried as hard as anybody to maintain unity. Even when the followers of George Whitefield seceded and formed their own branch of Methodism, the painful parting of the ways was effected with mutual charity and respect. As with the reformation and the civil war, this process of splintering is something that students of group dynamics accept as a given, and Wesley did the very best he could to minimise its damaging effects.

No pride or sanctimony, however, prevented Wesley and his followers from ministering in Newgate and other prisons, and even staying alongside condemned convicts in their death-carts, right to execution at Tyburn and elsewhere. Through his disciples and followers, the sick were given medication and visited individually and regularly, whilst the poor were provided for as best the people on the ground could afford.

As with many movements for spiritual renewal, music played its part. It was claimed by his opponents that Martin Luther achieved more by means of his music than anything else in the spread of his ideas. Similarly, in France, it was the singing of metrical psalms to the tunes of Goudimel and Claude Le Jeune that spear-headed the Huguenots’ avant-garde. And even today people with a Methodist upbringing never forget the joy of singing. Some time ago at St Saviours I introduced the Wesley hymn ‘O for a thousand tongues’ to the tune of ‘Ilkla Moor bar that,’ without realising that the nonsense words to the tune were actually devised during a day out in Yorkshire.

It’s important not to minimise the work of John’s brother Charles, the writer of no less than nine thousand hymns, which, however, tend to run along fairly similar lines, and which brother John used to ‘correct’ occasionally when he discerned poor teaching or duff theology in them. It isn’t Charles’s fault that many of his lyrics have been set to some very indifferent music; or that some of the strongest and most inspiring tunes which have remained in the Methodist tradition were dropped by the Victorians.

Perhaps the first and only thing one needs to understand about surfing is that nature is in charge, and that surfers’ ability to ‘take’ a huge wave requires split-second timing and barrels of courage. Without doubt the Wesleys caught the wave as best they could, and surely if Thompson, a fierce opponent of Methodism, could praise Wesley as a ‘great-hearted warhorse, we, who are the inheritors of Methodism’s special gifts of honest Bible scholarship and song, shouldn’t find it too difficult to acknowledge John Wesley to have been a true saint.