WHEN THE SAINTS …

25TH MAY THE VENERABLE BEDE

26th AUGUSTINE OF CANTERBURY

 JOHN CALVIN

PHILIP NERI

28th LANFRANC

30th JOAN OF ARC

31st THE VISIT OF MARY TO ELIZABETH

If the VENERABLE BEDE is not esteemed a ‘national treasure’ he ought to be. As well as celebrating him this week, there is St Augustine of Canterbury, who appears on the pages of Bede’s ‘Ecclesiastical History of the English People,’ so there will be an opportunity to spend some moments in the saintly scholar’s company.

All we know about Bede is found in a brief autobiographical sketch at the end of his ‘history,’ in which he makes mention of many other ‘books’ he wrote – mostly bible commentaries – during his apparently peaceful life spent in the monasteries of Jarrow and Wearmouth from around 680 until his death, on Ascension day 735. There is a host of legends as to how he got the epithet ‘Venerable,’ but the simplest is that it may have been a term applied to all priests at the time.

It seems that at age 7 he was given over to the monastery to be brought up; that he received deacon’s orders aged 19 – the canonical age being 25; and that he was priested at 30, both at the insistence of his abbot. There is a letter from Alcuin to the abbots of Jarrow and Wearmouth recording what a dedicated and conscientious student Bede had been in his time.

Bede had access at the monasteries to an especially well stocked library, and his writings demonstrate his acquaintance not only with the church fathers, but with many other branches of learning. He states that the object of his teaching and writing was ‘to meet the needs of the brethren.’ One of his pupils was Archbishop Egbert, founder of the school at York which was attended and made famous by Alcuin.

But over and above all this, Bede took a lively interest in the world outside the monastery walls, and seems to have applied himself to the monotonous manual work of writing, without the aid of a copyist; and all in a joyful spirit and one of simple charity to serve, and to live in obedience to the monastic rule.

Alcuin quotes him as saying; ‘I know the angels visit the canonical hours and the congregations of the brethren: what if they do not find me there? May they not say” Where is Bede?’

What we find with Bede is characterised as ‘the sanity of saintliness;’ a harmony between the active and contemplative life; ‘toil unsevered from tranquillity that many people today find in some of the simple repetitive work involved in gardening and food preparation, for example; but equally the occasional very human need for a break: : ‘Having completed the third book of the commentary on Samuel I thought I would take a rest for a while, and after recovering in that way my delight in studying and writing proceed to take in hand the fourth.’

Like all good teachers, however, Bede also seems to have possessed and nurtured in himself a very gentle pastoral feeling towards the weaker brethren. This spirit also manifests itself in the charity in which he writes even of opponents whom he sees as having been mistaken, but nonetheless conscientiously holding their beliefs.

These virtues of straightforwardness, kindness and tolerance are qualities that the English have traditionally prided themselves on cultivating, but which many of us may mistakenly eschew as being old-fashioned.

**… … … … … … … …**

AUGUSTINE [of Canterbury not Hippo] was our first Archbishop: `formerly abbot of the monastery of St Andrew in Rome, he was sent to re-evangelise the English in 596, and returned to Gaul briefly only to be consecrated Bishop in Arles. He died either in 604 or 605.

Bede writes:

‘King Ethelbert granted Augustine and his companions a dwelling in the city of Canterbury, which was the chief city of his kingdom, and in accordance with his promise, he allowed them provisions and did not inhibit their freedom to preach. As soon as they had occupied the house given to them, they began to emulate the life of the apostles and the primitive church. They were constantly at prayer, they fasted and kept vigils; and they preached the word of life to whomsoever they could. They regarded worldly things as of little importance, and accepted only the necessities of life from those they taught. They practised what they preached, and were willing to endure any hardship, even to the point of dying for the truths they proclaimed. Before long a number of people, admiring the simplicity of their holy lives, and the comfort of their heavenly message, believed and were baptised. On the east side of the city stood an old church, built in honour of St Martin, during the Roman occupation of Britain, where the queen, who was a Christian, used to pray. Here the monks first assembled to sing psalms, pray, to celebrate the Eucharist, and to preach, and to baptise, until the king’s own conversion to the faith gave them even greater freedom to preach, and to build and restore churches everywhere.

At last the king himself, among others, attracted by the pure lives of these holy men and their joyous promises, the truth of which they confirmed by many miracles, believed and was baptised. Thenceforward great numbers gathered each day to hear the word of God, forsaking their heathen worship and entering the unity of Christ’s holy church. While the king was pleased at their faith and conversion, it was said that he would not compel anyone to accept Christianity; for he had learned from his instructors and guides to salvation that the service of Christ must be accepted freely and not under compulsion.

Meanwhile god’s servant Augustine Visited Arles, and, in accordance with the command of the Holy Father Gregory, was consecrated Archbishop of the English nation by Etherius, Archbishop of that city.’

 … … … … … … … …

 Would you have expected to find JOHN CALVIN cited on the Anglican ‘saints’ calendar? He’s down simply as a reformer, which is certainly what he was. In fact, alongside Luther, the greatest of the reformers of c16. Just to be on the safe side, the day is shared between Calvin, Philip Neri, one of shining lights of the Catholic reformation, and our own Augustine of Canterbury: how Anglican!

John Calvin’s name is loaded with all kinds of baggage, and a few paragraphs can’t possibly suffice to unpack too much. There are biographies and an article in Diarmaid MacCulloch’s ‘All Things Made New,’ that deals, warts-and-all, with some of his mistakes and controversies, but in the perspective of the whole of church history, MacCulloch’s concise account of his positive achievements in his monumental ‘Christianity; the first 3.000 years,’ sums up the best reasons for featuring him on our calendar. Yet another perspective, with more insight and detail, can be found in Geoffrey Treasure’s excellent book ‘The Huguenots,’ which places Calvin in the perspective of the whole of French reformation history.

For one thing Calvin was a Frenchman, trying to change the entire basis of what he viewed a truly catholic church in France, where, unlike Germany or England, stiff conservative resistance came from the Sorbonne, and from ‘Parlement,’ empowered to sensor and burn books; come down hard on heretics, not hesitating to torture or burn enough of them ‘pour encourager les autres.’ It is only fair to bear this in mind if we shudder at the thought of his ‘theocracy’ in Geneva.

He was born in 1509, tonsured and beneficed at age 12 and sent to study theology on a bursary from his bishop , but almost immediately moved over to do law. His father worked as an administrator at Noyon Cathedral, but after a quarrel he was excommunicated, as was Calvin’s brother, who kept up the grudge.

Calvin was never ordained into any of the existing reformed polities, neither, as a self-taught theologian, did he come at the subject by the usual academic route; nor did he trouble himself to learn German to a level that would have enabled him to have meaningful colloquies with the German-speaking avant-garde of the reformation. He saw himself as a teacher, and, in time, as a pastor.

His family’s fight with the church must have had an impact on his attitude to the state of the contemporary church, but his support for friends with moderate reforming views would have gathered momentum as he witnessed them and their families fleeing for their lives, or being actually caught and executed, and in 1534 he resigned his benefices and ‘came out’ as a reformer himself.

While he waited for guidance, he went to Strasburg, but at the invitation of friends in Geneva, particularly the fiery preacher Guillaume Farel, The local council there had expelled their Prince Bishop, and his retinue of Catholic priests fled. The city, already a rich commercial centre, found itself under threat of invasion and reprisals, and needed to find allies and firm leadership rather quickly: Calvin was invited to stay. Surprisingly enough, however, ordinary people who had been free to enjoy their leisure as they wished, were not best pleased to find themselves compelled to attend sermons and be suddenly deprived of what, for the most part, had been innocent pleasures: They had simply exchanged one form of tyranny for another, and very soon they threw Calvin out.

After a few years elsewhere he was invited back, and found himself in an almost unique position of strategic and moral advantage: all he needed to do from now on in order to get his own way was to threaten to leave!

Calvin was ultimately responsible in Geneva not only for civil government, into which he threw himself unsparingly, but also as the arbiter of personal morality for all. Reformer he undoubtedly was, and a teacher and administrator of genius, setting up a machinery combining civil government with the functions of what would otherwise have been the separate body of church law and administration.

His famous doctrine of pre-destination comes from his conviction that the body of Christ cannot possibly exist haphazardly anywhere and everywhere on Earth, and must be truly located where it belongs, at the right hand of the Father. The ancient call to: ‘Lift up your hearts,’ meant precisely that: the faithful lift their hearts to the body of Christ. If, on the other hand, individuals conduct themselves in a manner that demonstrates lack of faith, their hearts don’t make it, and here we have Calvin’s perfectly logical doctrine of election. If you assert, as he did, that our sole purpose is to discover the will of God and carry it out, and that not everybody appears to either assent to this doctrine, or be willing to live to what Calvin discerned from the bible as appropriate standards of Godly conduct. Q E D! The fact that all kinds of doctrinal and ethical contradictions were cited as inconsistent in Calvin’s outworkings led him into some very long and wearisome controversies not least with other luminaries of the Reformation.

In 1553 a rather harmless eccentric who had, however, been condemned to death by the Catholic authorities ,was unwise enough to visit Geneva, and speak in public, for which he was arrested and subsequently burned at the stake. It was by no means a given that one jurisdiction could summarily execute ‘justice’ on behalf of another, although, in fairness, it was a practice in the sixteenth century for some towns to swap condemned criminals: nevertheless, this highly dubious act of sheer expediency won the Geneva regime enough respect from fellow reformers and opposition alike that Calvin was, at last, able to put clear blue water between his regime and that of John of Leyden in Munster, where, as in Geneva, the Prince Bishop had been thrown out, and the city taken over by foreigners – in this case by Anabaptists, leading to its reconquest by imperial armies and precisely the series of retributions that the good folk of Geneva had feared in their turn.

Geneva became a refuge for an increasing number of French would-be reformers, and Calvin’s systematic thought and administration made it relatively easy for him to train many of these, with a view to sending them back out into France. On the other hand, between the 1540’s and ’94 not a single native of Geneva held leading office in the government.

For a church community that doesn’t, presumably, accept biblical literalism, it is probably unfair even to ask whether Calvin’s life and considerable achievements could model any holiness we’d be interested to follow as an example: the question is more one of theology or even spirituality: don’t we hope and trust that God’s purposes for his world may turn out to involve a rather more 3-dimensional creativity than Calvin’s two dimensions of law and logic might have allowed for?

… … … … … … … …

By complete contrast, FILIPPO NERI is the patron saint of Rome, of humour and laughter.

Born in Florence in 1515, and intended as a businessman, at age 18 he experienced a vision that led him to Rome, where he studied philosophy and theology at the Sapienza for three years from 1535, but, for the present, declined ordination, and preferred to evangelise the poor, and being possessed of a particularly happy temperament, he attracted many people of all ranks and made friends easily including the other two principal luminaries of the Catholic reformation, St Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, and St Carlo Borromeo.

He soon attracted a following of sympathetic priests, and in 1548, Filippo established the Confraternity of the most Holy Trinity, for poor laymen to worship and pray together, and in 1551 he himself was finally ordained priest. A large room was built over the church of San Girolamo to house the growing fellowship, which gained the name of the Oratorians because of the bell they rang to call their disciples to prayer. In 1575 the ‘Congregation of the Priests of the Oratory’ received papal approval.

Filippo experienced many visions, and became an acknowledged spiritual director, his guidance being sought by many important figures of his time. He would receive confessions gently, with good humour and sometimes even with a joke. Fr Richard Rohr, another guru of our time, writes that for the most part, hearing confession is much like being pelted with marshmallows!

With his joyous personality and his success in attracting poor layfolk – not to mention running his services in Italian, rather than Latin, for a while he was suspected of fostering a nest of heretics: [wouldn’t you know!] The council of Trent, for all its administrative achievements, didn’t, of itself, produce very much original spirituality, and a deal less joy or good humour. Most of the very real spiritual renewal emanated from Filippo and others like him.

The Oratorians feature as a footnote in the history of music too. Their services used to start with silent prayer; several talks, and then they would sing ‘Laude,’ plural for ‘Laudat,’ a genre of songs to sacred texts that go right back to the Italian middle ages, that were sung in the home and at informal religious fellowship meetings. Palestrina and his lesser-known Roman contemporary Felice Anerio used to write music for the Oratorians; and if the word reminds you of Handel and Mendelssohn that’s because the oratorio started in 17th-century Rome as a performance of sacred drama that took place in the oratories, without scenery or any of the paraphernalia of opera, during Lent. When opera itself was forbidden. .

Filippo died in 1595; and was canonised in 1622.

… … … … … … … …

There is a statue of LANFRANC, William the Conqueror’s first archbishop of Canterbury on the outside of the cathedral.

He was born in Pavia, northern Italy probably in 1005, and studied Law, but soon crossed to France and became a Benedictine monk and taught with very great success at the school of Avranches [1039-42,] which was attended by students from France, the low countries and Germany many of whom distinguished themselves; many became life-long friends.

 It was in 1042 that Duke William [the Conqueror] made Lanfranc abbot of Le Bec, in Normandy, though he very nearly blotted his copybook in 1053 by objecting to William’s marriage to Matilda of Flanders, who was a relative. Eventually, however, we find Lanfranc visiting the Pope in order to gain his approval for the marriage.

In 1070 William brought Lanfranc over as Archbishop of Canterbury after the canonical deposition of his predecessor Stigand. The archbishop was an ex officio member of the king’s council, and he soon applied himself to replacing the Anglo-Saxon bishops with Norman nominees, although he remained friends with St Wulfstan of Worcester.

There was a dispute with the archbishop of York, who maintained that his province was independent of Canterbury’s jurisdiction, but Lanfranc won that one. He also used his legal training to have bishops tried before lay juries. Whilst supporting the Papacy, Lanfranc did what he could to maintain the independence of the English church, as well from papal interference as from corrupt lay influence. He also exerted himself to gain papal approval for William’s invasion of England!!!

As a Benedictine, Lanfranc adopted the Cluniac style monastic ethos, and appointed abbots who would bring inefficient and slack practice up to speed.

On the political front in 1075 he managed to uncover a revolt against King William of two earls, one of which he had to excommunicate. On William’s death I n 1087 Lanfranc secured the succession for William’s son, and did what he could to maintain good political order, but died in 1089.

David Knowles, the much-respected expert on monastic and spiritual matters, writes of Lanfranc’s wisdom and strength; that his letters show decision and an ordered and disciplined mind, whilst pointing out that; ‘We may perhaps detect in more than one of his actions as archbishop OF Canterbury a prudence of this world that contrasts with the direct candour and simplicity of Anselm, …’ who succeeded him as Archbishop, but in Anselm we encounter a truly great man and a 5-star saint.

… … … … … … … …

You can still see the very spot in the market-place of Rouen where JOAN of ARC was burned: there is a monument there on which people still lay flowers. There’s no sign of her there: the authorities didn’t want any remains to be available for veneration, so they threw her ashes in the Seine.

Joan was born in a small village in north-eastern France near Burgundian territory, which was pillaged and burned several times during her childhood.

The French had lost every battle in a generation, and after the death of Charles VI, his young son, the Dauphin, [equivalent to our Prince of Wales] had run out of luck and of options; and if we wonder how Joan became such a beacon of hope to the army. It’s important to bear in mind that psychology and superstition played as great a part in mediaeval battles as resources and good leadership

Joan’s story is pretty widely known: in brief, she claimed to have had visions telling her to go to the Dauphin, and, defeating the English along the way, to finally make it to Rheims Cathedral and have Charles crowned king, in order to thwart the infant Henry VI’s claim to the throne of France.

 Understandably the French military sent her away, but after one of her prophecies had been seen to materialise, and having no other options, Joan was conducted to the Dauphin. By means of her encouragement and an almost miraculous lifting of the siege of Orleans and a further succession of three French victories to gain enemy-held towns, the detachment finally made it to Rheims.

Having been wounded in a skirmish outside the walls of another town, Joan was captured and exchanged by the English for a Burgundian nobleman. It would have looked bad for an English church court to try her, so Joan was given in charge to a Burgundian bishop, and over a series of 15 interrogation sessions before a court of accomplished and educated churchmen, she gave a good account of herself. Joan’s answers put one in mind of Jesus’ promise to his disciples that under this kind of severe duress, the Holy Spirit would provide them with the right words.

There were two main points: if it could be proved that she was a witch, the French claim to the throne could be invalidated, and if a woman showed any signs of eccentricity she was always likely to be taken for one. The bishop asked Joan the kind of trick question that would condemn her however she answered it: ‘Are you in God’s grace?’ A ‘no’ would be taken as admitting she was a sinner, and ‘yes’ would show her presumption in knowing God’s will. In the event she answered: ‘if I’m not in god’s good grace, may he put me there: if I am, may God so keep me there. I should be the saddest creature in the world if I knew that I were not in god’s grace.’

The other charge was of wearing men’s clothes, which she did in prison, of course, to make it harder for the guards to rape her. Compelled to revert to women’s clothes in prison, it’s impossible to imagine that she wouldn’t have been abused, which may have contributed to the serious mental collapse she suffered.

If prison broke the spirit and resolution of John the Baptist, we need not be surprised that Joan eventually broke and signed a confession, and received a life sentence. Subsequently she suffered a vision in which she was taunted that she’d sold her immortal soul in order to save her life, and she withdrew her confession and was executed in very short order.

Like all such popular characters, Joan’s story attracts a lot of sentimentality: portraits of her in elaborate dresses completely miss the point that she was the poor, uneducated daughter of a peasant. Neither is it helpful at a distance of 600 years to question her authenticity. 100 years later we have ‘the maid of Kent,’ Elizabeth Barton being manipulated by senior churchmen to ‘prophesy’ against the king’s marriage to Anne Boleyn; but Joan’s statement that she’d rather have been staying at home with her spinning than obeying her vision is surely authentic enough; and the experience of having her village trashed around her as a child must have stayed with her one way or another.

The early Christian centuries produced a number of young female martyrs, and what seems to shine through the accounts of their sufferings is sheer purity and the courage of their convictions; Joan was acquitted of everything at a ‘retrial’ 30 years later, and it’s rather shameful that it wasn’t until 1920 that she was acknowledged a martyr and canonised.