WHEN THE SAINTS …

There are two minor apostles and two major figures whose feast days come up this week:

Catherine of Siena, April 30th

Philip & James the less on May 1st

Athanasius of Alexandria. May 2nd

Saints Philip and James (the less) are apostles, and, whereas next to nothing is known about James from the bible, Philip appears three times in the Gospel of John, and not to be confused with Philip the deacon whose exploits come up in Acts, facilitating, first, the presentation to Jesus of Philip’s brother Andrew. Secondly, at the feeding of the five thousand, as a foil, and thirdly, perhaps most significantly, at ch14 v8, when he asks Jesus ‘Show us the Father and we’ll be satisfied.’

Like ‘doubting ‘ Thomas, Philip’s courage and honesty stand in for the best of us, who are committed and interested enough to ask questions that challenge orthodoxy, and can withstand, as Philip does, Jesus’ implied rebuke: ‘Philip, you’ve been with me all this time and still you don’t know me!’

The first half of John ch14 is often read at funerals; a time when searching questions and doubts arise that Thomas, that most loyal and faithful disciple, begin to raise on our behalf. His courage and trust let Philip, and later Judas (not Iscariot) express their honestly felt anxieties and doubts.

No disciple, student or pupil need ever be ashamed of seeking clarification from a teacher, of however exalted a position; neither need teachers, or parents struggling to assist with homework or attempting home schooling, or – for that matter – teaching in church - ever be ashamed to admit our own inability to understand or explain anything and everything. The Gospels occasionally touch on the reality that Jesus himself sometimes had to learn about the limitations of his auditors and, most of all, his disciples.

Dealing in certainties is always dangerous anyway. Tom Lehrer puts the scientific modus operandi in his inimitable way when reciting the chemical elements to a well-known Gilbert & Sullivan tune:

‘These are all the elements whose news has come to Harvard’

There may be many others but they haven’t been dis’carvard!

Scientists of another stripe stick to their orthodoxy, and it’s when a pandemic arises that the rest of us look to science for certainties, only to be told, in all humility, that whilst there is well-founded hope of successfully dealing with it, there is work to be done.

Some scientists nowadays accuse theologians of dealing in certainty, which some would seem to; but perhaps the safest definition of a theologian is an Eastern Orthodox one: ‘A theologian is one who prays; and anyone who prays is a theologian.’ Take that most notorious theologian, former bishop of Durham David Jenkins, whose 13-word creed runs:

‘God is: God is as he is in Jesus; therefore we have hope.’

It’s a creed; not a scientifically tested formula, acceptance of which position might have saved the 4th-century church a lot of strife, which brings us none too seamlessly to St Athanasius of Alexandria.

The doctrine of the trinity is barely hinted at in the New Testament, and it is thanks to that group of early theologians we call ‘The church Fathers – and not a few mothers!’ that a provisional set of parameters for exploring what we can dis’carvar’ of God’s nature have been delineated.

There are several plausible ways of exploring the relationships among God the Father, Jesus the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and St Athanasius emerges from a blizzard of controversy, involving real suffering on all sides, as the champion of mainstream Trinitarian orthodoxy.

The tragedy is that these controversies, like many subsequent ones, became enmeshed in various political, cultural and even linguistic differences: Athanasius did everything he could to avoid succeeding as Bishop and Patriarch of Alexandria, but his people were persistent in refusing anybody else. During a patriarchate of 45 years, he was deposed, exiled, tried before councils and emperors, and threatened with execution and assassination, in defence of Nicaean formulations.

During these five periods of exile, however, Athanasius travelled extensively including six years getting to know and learn from the early desert fathers, and, in the process, writing the first biography of St Anthony of Egypt, one of the most influential of them. He also became acquainted with Pachomius, the retired soldier who pioneered the earliest monastic community.

As with our consideration of St Catherine of Siena, it is really worth going to Wikipedia to get a more detailed overview than it’s possible to glean from the perfectly adequate, but necessarily brief surveys of the saints that occur in the day-to-day Anglican literature. Wikipedia also provides related pictures where appropriate.

Athanasius and Catherine are celebrated as ‘teachers of the faith,’ although what they teach and how they teach it are about as different as can be.

As well as Catherine of Alexandria, she of the wheel, there are Catherine of Genoa and Bologna, but Catherine of Siena wins out as patron saint of Italy along with St Francis. Recently, together with Brigit of Sweden, she’s also patron saint of Europe; not bad for one of 22 children, born into the family of a Sienese dyer in or around 1347.

You can visit what is said to be Catherine’s home down a fairly steep flight of steps in Siena, but you won’t experience anything more than a well-kept shrine and a gift shop said to have originally been the kitchen. Go to the wonderful Duomo and the council chambers instead.

Despite the famous allegories of good and bad government depicted in the main council chamber itself, we shouldn’t be surprised or disappointed to learn that 14th-century Siena had its riots and factional feuds; but Catherine achieved the reputation of a peace-maker, and became involved first in nursing the sick, later effecting some quite spectacular conversions, attracting a caucus of faithful disciples whom she called her ‘Famiglia,’ giving spiritual guidance and direction Her fame spread first around northern Italy, and out as far as Avignon, where the Papacy had set up shop since 1309.

Perhaps it’s possible to understand Catherine if we think of Greta Thunberg or even Joan of arc. Whilst her biographers depict her mystical prayer trances in the light of Old Testament prophets and patriarchs, there is a sense in which she, Catherine, may have shared traits in common with them. The Old Testament scholar and Anglican priest John Rogerson makes it clear that, in order to get their message across, most of the prophets would have needed to function, to some extent, as street artistes, and Catherine seems to have had an ability to communicate to ordinary people, as well as to those of higher social strata, some of whom actually became members of her ‘Famiglia’ and took down the many letters she dictated, often to the most powerful – rulers and even Popes. In time she travelled to Florence, Rome and Avignon, where she did the best she knew how to bring peace and reconciliation among people at street and government circles.

Like Francis, Catherine is said to have received the stigmata – the wounds of Christ on her hands and feet, but invisibly in her case. Whilst her spiritual direction to others was usually practical and clear, her own spiritual life was characterised by deep mysticism of a rapturous nature. Whilst her letters may read like sermons, her ‘dialogue,’ her own writing, demonstrates her passionate love of Christ.

Catherine has suffered much criticism from many quarters, pointing out, among other things, that her peace-making efforts at church at political level were unsuccessful. That her writing was unsystematic, and inelegant, and that she was uncompromising and, no doubt, undiplomatic in her speaking truth to power. One might add that, as a child of her time, when religion and superstition were often indistinguishable; or that her ‘sweet Mamma’ image may have touched a nerve, particularly in the Italian male, her rise to sanctity was a safe bet. All this is beside the point. It’s also the case that very little was done officially to promote her canonisation until a Sienese bishop was elected Pope in 1456, but she would surely have already been a saint in God’s eyes, and in those of the people who knew her best.

Catherine took good care of her own family of origin as well as her disciples, and was known for her gentleness, good humour and kindness. Neither did she have the structure of convent life to support her work, nor was she educated and encouraged by family or the third order of Dominican friars with whom she sought to share her vocation.

If we were to measure sainthood by life-time achievement many of our favourites would fall at the first fence. Catherine’s mysticism would have counted for nothing unless she had managed to transform her life circumstances and whatever mental or personality flaws she may have possessed into an almost superhuman abundance of grace, love and compassion.

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PRAYER

In this difficult time there are two useful spiritual tools that occur in the form of prayer: the SERENITY PRAYER, which has been attributed to Meister Eckhart, but surely goes back much further in the tradition:

God, grant me the serenity

To accept the things I cannot change;

Courage to change the things I can,

And wisdom to know the difference.

One of the church’s prayers for Easter contains these useful lines;

‘Help us to identify the things (in us) that should surely die:

Redundant relationships;

Tired habits,

And fruitless longings.

Stuff will be pushed into our consciousness both as the result of external as well as internal conflicts, so there’s no time like the present for working on them faithfully and gently, and with ‘the myth of perfection’ somewhere safe to hand among our mental furniture.