**WHEN THE SAINTS...**

There are only two feast days this week. The 4th of May marks Saints and Martyrs of the English Reformation era and the 8th celebrates Mother Julian of Norwich.

**Rev Robert Atwell writes:**

‘This day is set aside to remember all who witnessed to their Christian faith during the conflicts in church and state in England, which lasted from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, but which were at their most intense in the sixteenth. Though the reform movement was aimed chiefly at the Papacy, many Christian men and women of holiness suffered for their allegiance to what they believed to be the truth of the Gospel. As the movement grew in strength, it suffered its own internecine struggles, with one group determined that they alone were keepers of truth, and that all others were therefore at best in a state of ignorance, and at worst heretical.

It seems to be a given of group dynamics that what may originate as a two-sided conflict invariably generates splinter groups as differences become more extreme on either of the original ‘sides,’ history and conflicts in our own time show that when religion, politics and cultural differences combine, they tend to ferment a much more complex and serious evil than superficial and simplistic stratagems may be able to resolve. Martyrs in the 16th century were not necessarily created by one side against the other. Neither did many of the major movers and shakers of the times meet their deaths with entirely clean hands: More and Cranmer are two of the best-known figures who died for their convictions, but both had a hand in hounding other martyrs to execution. Neither is it the case that ‘the reformation’ proceeded in the same way everywhere in Europe. On the contrary, geography, culture and the machinery of government in each region proved to be major factors in determining outcomes; and England, having experienced sustained wars in the 15th century, managed to avoid the appalling conflicts that resulted in France, the Netherlands, Bohemia and Germany, and you will recall that the civil war of the 17th century was almost entirely among various shades of Protestantism.

Whereas in Germany and Bohemia support for reform was ready and waiting, very well researched literature by Eamon Duffy and others have rather demolished the notion that in England, at least in the parish, there was any such popular pressure for change. As for the monasteries, Wolsey, a Catholic, had already begun the process of abolition before Cromwell took it over; and, had major abbey churches and cathedrals not been spared these depredations, an entire and very valuable part of English heritage would have been lost forever, not least its unique music. As it was, monks such as the composer Nicholas Ludford were pensioned off and disappear altogether from history.

Some of us may remember Mark Santer as a former Bishop of Kensington, and following the above quotation, there is a passage from his book: ‘Their Lord and Ours’ that asserts the right of any group to cherish its own memories of the past, but not to ’weaponise’ these myths with their prejudices and omissions, in order to try to place other such groups in the wrong; and that sin approaches near to blasphemy when any one fails to remember that Christ died in order to bring all people together.

**… … … … … … … … … … … …**

One major English figure connects Julian and the English mystics with the reformation; he is John Wycliffe, the star Oxford theologian, who, together with Mother Julian, and most of the other English mystics, all arose in the generation following the ‘Black Death’ of 1347-8; and last week we met Catherine of Siena; another.

In Bohemia followers of one more important contemporary, Jan Hus managed to survive his betrayal and judicial murder at the Council of Constance in 1415, and were well prepared once church and state combined to force Luther into breaking with the Pope. But in England Wycliffe against whom the Pope issued no less than five anathemas, was protected by John of Gaunt. Wycliffe’s followers, often of high birth, supported preachers known as Lollards, who were still very much around in mid-16th century. English contemporaries of Wycliffe and the mystics were Chaucer and William Langland, author of ‘The Vision of Piers the Ploughman.’ In Italy Boccaccio, had great fun excoriating corrupt practices among the secular clergy in particular; and Chaucer, who took inspiration from his work, followed suit with relish, even in his portrait of an exemplary poor parson. Wycliffe, on the other hand, attacked doctrine and practice, which was far more serious.

The Lollards’ views varied considerably, but had in common disregard of confession and indulgences; the Papacy and of veneration of the saints, and consequently, of pilgrimages. Nowadays Wycliffe himself is remembered for translating part of the bible, but before the advent of printing, this, together with his assertion that the ‘Body of Christ is entirely absent from the host’, remained the concern of a relatively small number of academics. Where the Lollards scored heavily was in some very powerful sermons.

The four principal English mystics of the late 14th century – Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, the anonymous author of ‘The cloud of Unknowing’ and Mother Julian each had different takes on the life of the Spirit. Richard Rolle, the earliest, was the most passionate; Hilton’s ‘Ladder of Perfection’ expounds a rather more classic and systematic way of bringing the soul into the presence of God: ‘The Cloud of Unknowing’ is largely based in the ‘negative’ spiritual path of Pseudo-Dionysus [supposedly an Areopagite whose interest Paul managed to attract on his visit to Athens [Acts ch17 v32 ff], but who was probably a Syrian monk of the 6th century whose writings were very influential during the middle ages.

Mother Julian of Norwich took the name of the saint by whose church her anchorite’s cell was setup. It is not known whether she was a professed nun, and very little is known about her other than what she tells us in her writing. The editor of the Penguin edition of ‘Revelations ‘ is not even certain that she had entered the solitary life at the time of the serious illness that brought on her well-known visions. In these days of ‘lock-down’ we might wonder why anybody would choose to live as a recluse. Evidence seems to indicate that many cities and towns in England were glad to house them: London at one time had eight. They might give advice, spiritual direction or guidance, and, would be expected to support the community by means of prayer.

The original recluses were, of course, the hermits or desert fathers [and mothers] who lived apart from one another, very simply, supporting themselves as best they could, but forming very strong and mutually nurturing relationships. The rule of St Benedict brought about what later generations of ‘religious’ felt to be a more comfortable balance between the practical needs of a community living together, and being released to pray and worship under the direction and discipline of a resident superior. Throughout the Middle Ages a variety of greater and smaller monastic orders were set up usually with individual emphases of spirituality, and from the 11th century onwards, often with the aim of going ‘back to basics.’

One variant order arose in the 11th century; the Carthusians, whose monasteries and convents catered to those who were no longer content with living in close community, but felt called to practise a more solitary way of life, perhaps nearer to the ethos of the desert fathers. These establishments consisted of separate houses, usually with their own gardens and with lay folk serving their practical needs. They would meet on Sundays, but would worship and pray as solitaries. Whereas it took a while for the Carthusians to grow and spread, because many felt the way of life to be harsh, it’s interesting to discover that after the Black Death no less than six new foundations were set up in England.

From the 12th century in northern Europe, originating from towns in the low countries where there were more women than men arose the beguines, lay women who at first acquired neighbouring houses, and later built houses known as beguinages, where they lived together, going out to work either for the wool trade or for charities. These semi-monastic communities of women took only a vow of chastity, which they were free to review at any time they might wish to leave: there was no obligation. These communities flourished from the 13th to the 16th centuries, despite a good deal of suspicion as well as encouragement from various segments of the church. Becoming a beguine could be seen as an attractive alternative lifestyle for women wishing to avoid the path of marriage and conventional family life.

A recluse was a valued spiritual and social resource in any town, and with economic pressure from friars, pardoners and the church generally; and a keen awareness that something was very wrong in the state of Holy church, the calling to a solitary life was, perhaps, another attractive option, particularly for a woman, when beguinages appear not to have taken in England.

Candidates who felt a calling to the solitary life would first be examined by an officer of the diocese, and part of the deal was proof that they could work to support themselves; women as embroiderers or other needle work; men perhaps by writing or illuminating manuscripts.

If you’ve ever witnessed the traditional ‘clothing’ of a friend or acquaintance into a religious order, you will know that its ethos in some ways represents a funeral; death to the world. The recluse would be invited into the cell, followed by the order to block the entrance. Once enclosed, they would normally remain in the one place until death.

The ‘cell’ hardly ever resembled that in a modern prison, or even that of a monastery or convent. You can still see Thomas Merton’s old hermitage on YouTube, to give you an idea. There might be several rooms; perhaps a garden, and Mother Julian was known to have had at least two servants, who would provide the necessities, such as shopping etc. There was no expectation of poverty in the monastic sense, and each ‘cell’ had a window on the world side through which conversations could be held. It does seem that day visitors were permitted, and there were even cases of two solitaries living together. Some years ago I made a retreat with an old friend who lived in Cornwell as a solitary alongside one other person.

We do get another angle on Julian, as spiritual director to Margery Kempe, a complete one-off, who, having respectably married at age 20, gave birth to 14 children, but, after the first birth, suffered a rare but very intense form of post-natal depression known as post-partem psychosis, during which she experienced an encounter with Jesus that changed her whole way of life. She eventually negotiated cessation of marital relations with her husband, and, having set up and suffered two successive business failures, she took to the life of a pilgrim, visiting Jerusalem, Rome, Compostela Cologne as well as the established pilgrim sites in England. Modern readers of her autobiography, ‘The Booke of Margery Kempe,’ would be suspicious of the authenticity of her vision, as she herself certainly was; but after some days together, Mother Julian affirmed her calling, encouraging her to disregard her detractors.

This ‘blooming of ‘a thousand flowers‘ following such universal desolation and upheaval should encourage the mystics, prophets and theologians among us today - THAT’S YOU[!] – to open our hearts and minds prayerfully, so as to be able to participate in the re-ordering of our values and society after the present upheavals, in order to help bring about a similarly diverse out-pouring of God’s Spirit in our time.… And we already have a head start. One of the most devastating passages in the ‘Decameron’ is Boccaccio’s depiction of Florence at the height of the plague: clergy fled the city, leaving the populace to deal with disposal of bodies if they could, not to mention the general grief and terror. Even Boccaccio’s ten acquaintances, who make up the back-bone of his collection of stories, did what all privileged members of society did then and ever since, if they could – fled into the comparative safety of the countryside.

**… … … … … … … …**

**PRAYER**

Here is a way of praying for others derived from the prayer cards that are available from the Julian cell in Norwich:

**THE WAY OF AWARENESS.**

There are three simple steps.

STEP 1 Become aware that God has been, working through all time, and continues to work for healing of the world; and that our prayer is to be part of that work.

STEP 2 hold the intercession request in our hand [I have small pieces of paper with a name written on each.] The process doesn’t require special concentration or effort; simply the awareness of being for example, in the presence of a picture or of a sunset.

STEP 3 Put the slip to one side, and simply be in God’s presence. We do not have to consciously BE in his presence on behalf of the other: what has already happened makes that clear.

Michael Ramsey emphasises that ‘intercession does not mean being Clever, or even necessarily being aware of the particular needs in the situation we’re concerned about: That is for God. We are to fill the water-butts with water; God makes the wine: We are to remove the stone: ‘Lazarus come forth!’ belongs to him.