17TH OCTOBER IGNATIUS of ANTIOCH 37-107

Ignatius is the earliest of the so-called Apostolic Fathers, together with Clement of Rome, Irenaeus and Polycarp; the first generation and people who were known to have established connections with the disciples. Tradition has it that he was a pupil of John the Evangelist although John is more usually associated with Ephesus, at the western end of Asia Minor. Both Peter and Paul preached in Antioch, which was an important centre of the eastern Mediterranean and if Ignatius was born in 37 it is possible that he could, at least, have heard one or both preaching somewhere.

In 69 he was made Bishop of Antioch, only four years after the traditional date of Peter and Paul’s martyrdom in Rome. We know nothing more about the circumstances of Ignatius’ life other than his final journey to Rome where Christians came out to honour him, so he must have had an active ministry. We know that at the Colosseum he was thrown to the lions and died almost immediately.

His principal significance for the church is that he wrote seven letters to other Christian communities in Ephesus, Magnetia, Tralles and Rome: at Troas he wrote to Polycarp, and to churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia. Recently the authenticity of three of these letters has been challenged, but most scholars nowadays accept them as having been written by Ignatius, and they are easily available in print.

Famously he writes of his coming trip to the arena, stating that he was being chained to his captors whom he describes as ‘ten leopards.’ He positively relishes the meal he is to provide for the animals, being certain that by this means he will be released into the freedom of God’s kingdom.

The fact that his authenticated letters dated as early as they must be, makes them of the utmost significance to church historians. In them he emphasises unity, obedience to their bishops and the importance of the Eucharist for salvation. He describes Peter as founder of the church, and it is probably this and his promotion of the office of bishop to some sections of the church have found inconvenient.

By far the best way to make your own judgement is to read them; they form a brief body of writing.

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18TH OCTOBER LUKE the EVANGELIST

LUKE the EVANGELIST was a close friend and occasional minister to Paul; the dear physician.’

Virtually everything we know about Luke is found in the New Testament, including, of course, the Gospel attributed to him and ‘Acts. ’There seems less reason to doubt his authorship of these books than those thought to be written by Matthew and John the apostles.

Luke was a Greek, writing primarily for non-Jews, and in a spirit that reflects our Lord’s concern for the poor and marginalised, for women, and for the right use of money.

To Luke we owe the parables of the Good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the dishonest steward and the rich man and Lazarus, and his occasional detail as to the work and function of the women who supported the ministry of Jesus. There are some very challenging texts that need very careful analysis, and Luke’s account of the council of Jerusalem, when read alongside parts of Galatians conflict, unless we take it that there may have been a second such council to which Paul refers when recounting his serious quarrel with Peter.

His writings are characterised by elegance, craftsmanship and an attention to the development of plot and placing of events that not only reads beautifully, but disguises the skill with which, for example, he links his Gospel with the Old testament in the opening chapters, and, in Acts, plots the gradual spread of the church from the scene around the ‘Ascension’ with the 120 believers, right through to ch10-11, known as the ‘Gentile Pentecost, ’before going onto Paul ; his conversion and later ministries around Syria and Asia Minor.

There has been much scholarly beard-wagging over the ‘we’ passages in Acts, [ch16 v10ff; ch20 v5 ff & 27-8], and with references to him in three of Paul’s Epistles, again, there seems no reason to doubt that Luke did accompany Paul on parts of his missionary journeys.

His writings are generally thought to date from around 85 C E, so that the legend that he died in Greece at the age of 84 is entirely possible, though unauthenticated. The information comes in Eusebius’ famously ‘spun’ history, in which he relies on Bishop Appius who lived a century later.

It has been suggested that the reason for Luke’s having left the ending of ‘Acts’ in the air, as it were, is that his original readers would have known what happened to Peter and Paul in Rome around the year 65, and that he originally hoped to make a trilogy finishing with Paul’s intended visit to Spain and the other end of the Mediterranean.

Luke’s Gospel emanates wonder and joy, and, on first acquaintance what strikes the reader is the presence of angels. Whilst it was entirely praiseworthy to link the nativity and other stories with known occurrences in ancient history, they don’t always seem to stack up, particularly the notion that all Jews were required to gather at Bethlehem for a census, which, whilst accounting for the lack of accommodation, ignores the maths, which could have told him that the descendants of David would have run into at least a million people – men alone, which no ruler of whatever stripe would have been wise to encourage around a small town just outside Jerusalem.

Richard Burridge points out, with some relevance, that the classic biography of a great personage usually featured special events around their birth; events from their lives and an account of their deaths, so that Luke, writing in this tradition, would have needed to top and tail his account of Jesus’ life with such anecdotes, and in the context of such a good read, with interesting moral theology, challenging parables and inspiring narrative, what is the occasional mistake here and there?

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19TH OCTOBER HENRY MARTYN

HENRY MARTYN [1781-1812] STUDIED AT Cambridge and became an avowed evangelical and friend of the famous preacher Charles Simeon.

He went out to Calcutta as chaplain to the East India company, intending to minister to the staff, but there didn’t seem much for him to do, when even the Magnificat was forbidden at evensong in case the words ‘Bring down the mighty …’put thoughts into the wrong peoples’ heads!!! A diary entry from his missionary days among the Indians themselves find him conversing with a Brahmin who is quite delighted to find any ‘Sahib’ interested in religion at all. If you’ve read William Dalrymple’s account of the ‘John Company’ as the East India Company was known, you’d have no difficulty believing Martyn’s story.

Martyn, who died of TB in Armenia, is principally known for having translated the New Testament into Hindustani, Persian and Arabic. The Christ-like element in his life is that those to whom he was called had no use for him: ‘Go out into the streets and the hedges and call everybody to my feast …’

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