WHEN THE SAINTS …

20TH of AUGUST BERNARD of CLAIRVAUX

20TH of AUGUST WILLIAM & CATHERINE BOOTH

The Cistercians achieved international fame in the middle of last century through the writings of Thomas Merton, whose brief lectures to his novices about monastic life carefully re-mastered from tape in the 60’s, can still be obtained easily from Audible or Apple books; and you can still visit his hermitage on YouTube.

The record of Merton’s faith journey, ‘The seven-storey Mountain’ made the bestseller charts, and his two books ‘[More] Seeds of Contemplation’ are very useful prayer guides from a man who interested himself deeply in issues of world peace and interfaith dialogue.

**BACKGROUND**

ST BERNARD of CLAIRVAUX didn’t actually found the Cistercian order early in C12, but such was his personal prestige and ubiquity that his name remains associated with its foundation.

By the middle of the 11th century the papacy had become a prize contended for by the grandest Italian families: the Holy Roman Emperor decided to take on the reform of the church by placing his own nominee onto the papal throne, and in 1053 Leo IX initiated a programme of administrative and structural reform which his successors consolidated over the next 20 years, and particularly in 1073 with the election of Gregory VII, who reigned for another 12 years.

Some of the reforms included:

* Calling to Rome the best churchmen he knew to act as a supporting counsel: these men he called cardinals. And formed them into a college who would elect the next pope.
* Lay investiture was a real problem: in a feudal society kings and magnates appointed their own nominees to take ecclesiastical posts really in order to gain political allies: land meant soldiers, and it was important to be able to call on these whenever necessary. Leo now insisted that appointments and investitures were the business of the church.
* He appointed papal legates to travel around and attend to and enforce his letters and decrees: this meant that the Pope was putting himself forward not simply as the ruler of central Italy, but of the whole of Christendom.
* It was in Leo’s papacy that it was decreed that priests were to remain celibate; something that had already been the law, but by this time they could be handing on their ‘vocations’ to their children, whether born in or out of marriage.

Partly as a consequence of all these reforms, and partly for internal reasons, there developed a reaction against what had become the social and perhaps somewhat over-elaborate display and liturgies of the Cluniac monasteries. Important as they were to the survival of western monasticism, and, indeed, to western civilisation, many brighter spirits were seeking a life of greater simplicity and solitude. Before we deal with St Bernard, it’s important to realise that his was only one of many reactions against the Cluniac version of the Benedictine order.

In Tuscany at this time there arose two new orders: the Camaldolese, who were hermits living close together; and the Valambrosians, who lived similarly, with the important difference that they introduced a system of lay brothers in order to relieve the monks from the business of everyday life.

In around 1075, with papal reforms well on the way, St Robert founded a Benedictine monastery at Molesme, in France, and such was his charisma and holiness, and his pastoral heart that he attracted some of the best vocations around at the time. These included Guarenus [Warren], who left to found his own house of mixed vocations to the life of hermit and of Kaleots, two or three monks sharing a small house; and St Bruno, who came to him while in process of working out his calling: Robert sent him to a grange attached to the monastery. In 1084, however, St Bruno founded ‘la Grande Chartreux’ near Grenoble, which became the first Carthusian house.

For all that Robert had managed to trim the Cluniac regime of much of its elaborations, his monastery remained Benedictine. Moreover he really felt called to live as a hermit himself, and he would be elected abbot of somewhere, and after a while slope off to become one.

The problem was, however, that, whereas Cluny was seen as too comfortable within the feudal system, any Benedictine house relied on its lands and the serfs who worked it, not to mention that even a slimmed-down monastery such as Molesme ran schools and parishes which were still felt to be encumbrances, not to mention that they had 35 dependent priories. The smaller hermits groups were respected more than emulated. So there was a need for a stricter order than Cluny, but one that allowed monks to live in community with all the advantages of psychological and physical security and access to the sacraments. Those who wished to return to what they conceived to be the original Benedictine purity had to re-think what that purity meant for vocations at the end of the 11th century; things had changed:

* The world had changed
* Values had changed
* The structure of the church had changed
* The role of the sacraments was different
* The role of the priesthood was different too.

It was impossible to recreate Monte Cassino, which, in any case, had been destroyed by the Lombard’s before Gregory wrote his hagiography of Benedict: Merton, in his lectures to novices, suggests that little or nothing is actually known about Benedict, and that his rule really derives from Benedict of Amiane in the 8th century: which may or may not be the case.

All this goes to explain the ferment in monastic life at the end of C11, and particularly at Molesme. In 1098 Robert, together with Steven Harding, Alvaric and 18 more of the most fervent monks left Molesme to found a new monastery at Citeaux, in marshland granted them by the Duke of Burgundy, but Molesme began to deteriorate without Robert, who was called back by the papal legate, after petition by the monks he had left behind, which is testimony to his own charisma and holiness.

In 1112 Bernard presented himself at Citeaux with no less than 30 of his male relatives.

**\*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\***

He’s known as BERNARD of CLAIRVAUX because within a mere three years of his arrival at Citeaux he and his followers had emigrated there to found ‘his own’ monastery. Needless to say, he’s nothing to do with huge dogs with miniature brandy barrels round their necks though it could be said that he shared their commanding and charismatic presence, which, in his case, however, proved something of a mixed blessing.

How difficult it is to imagine Jesus objectively: most of us don’t even try, because he meets us where we are and our imagination of him arises, no doubt, at least partly from our own deepest spiritual needs. Readers of the Gospels can agree that he must have been endowed with huge charisma, managing, as he did, to attract crowds around him as well as to inspire those who encountered him at close quarters with a sense of his personal holiness.

The same seems to have been true of Bernard, though Jesus is the only human being who completely overcame the three temptations brought to him in the wilderness; those of using his God-given powers for the acquisition of personal gain, adulation and kingly rule. ‘Saints do not fall from heaven,’ and it is unjust for those of us who lack Bernard’s personal gifts to condemn his abuse of them when we have no possible notion of the struggles he underwent against those temptations, particularly the second and third. .

In his own quest for simplicity and holiness you might have thought he’d have been at home with the Cistercians, and he was always aware that Clairvaux lay at the centre of his spiritual life. The problem was that he was also endowed with charisma, qualities of leadership and couldn’t always resist the church’s willingness to deploy these gifts in order to head up its own campaigns. This said, he was probably the most important figure in c12 church history until Pope Innocent III. One might wonder whether, had he been born a century later, he might have founded an order of friars, because it’s almost as though monastic life as it was couldn’t satisfactorily contain the breadth of Bernard’s personality and gifts.

So much for his external profile: as a preacher he was famous, but his masterpiece, his 86 written sermons on the ‘Song of Songs,’ illustrate his proportionately great powers of insight and mysticism. In addition, his advice to his protégé Pope Eugenius III ‘On consideration,’ show him as a wise and perceptive spiritual adviser whose impact on Dante brought about his selection as guide at the climax of ‘the Divine comedy’ to introduce the writer to the Virgin Mary. Many important church leaders, including Pope John 23rd, drew strength, balance and inspiration from this sensitive and insightful advice.

There is a short but powerful ‘Treatise on the love of God,’ which, like some other spiritual guides, reminds us that to love God merely for the benefits he showers upon us is, in Bernard’s book, no love at all. The real prize is to love God for what he is.

Another thing for which Bernard is known is his encouragement of the cult of Mary, and to this day every Cistercian monk precedes his given name with ‘Mary,’ which many nowadays simply reduce to the letter ‘M.’

It is vitally important and only just to emphasise Bernard’s abiding spiritual and theological achievements before dealing with what we would now term his career. Always bear in mind his difficulties in restraining his impulse to lead; to defend the church, and particularly his own hardly won values of holy simplicity.

Bernard was born at Fontaines, near Dijon, in 1090, and the family intended him for military service as a knight, and it must be said that he had the necessary qualities of leadership. His education seems to have been rather limited; he certainly never studied theology. At age 22, in 1112, he entered the monastery of Citeaux, but such was his progress [nuisance value?] that three years later, in 1115, he was sent to found another Cistercian house in a deserted valley which he named ‘valley of light, = Clairvaux.’ By the time of his death in 1153 there were hundreds of Cistercian monasteries all over Europe, including England, very largely as a tribute to Bernard himself.

In his novice lectures of 1962, Thomas Merton suggests that, while Bernard was a holy man and brilliant abbot, he could also be somewhat duplicitous in winning the finest vocations from the Benedictines to his Cistercian order; and goes on to suggest that the prevailing ethos was that if a monk weren’t a Cistercian he was already half-way to Hell! Tolerance was never Bernard’s strong suit. The other thing, incidentally, that Merton mentions is that, in his efforts to reform the chant, he appointed somebody who thoroughly ‘messed it up!!!’

Whilst the achievements of many saints transcend their time and geographical setting, it is inevitable that they remain primarily within those limits. There are aspects of Bernard’s life that modern Christians would prefer to pass over in silence, but which took up much of his time and energy, and responsibility for which can be laid justly to the promptings of the church, to which Bernard remained a loyal and obedient ‘soldier,’ for all that one suspects he made the best of this licence once he had it.

Bernard hated over-complication: it’s one of the reasons he felt so much contempt for the Cluniac version of Benedict’s rule. Another thing he grew to hate was the up-and-coming scholastic movement, centred mainly on the University of Paris, which he also viewed as unnecessary and vain over-complexity: rather than coming to God through Aristotelian logic and the power of reason, Bernard felt that it was simpler and more profitable to seek God through personal experience.

Roman Catholics, of course, see Thomas Aquinas as the peak of scholastic achievement; having managed to integrate Aristotelian logic with the main outline of Christian faith, a work that has subsequently become the ground of much Catholic doctrine and dogma. One of his many brilliant predecessors was Peter Abelard, famous for his unfortunate affair with the daughter of one of his professors, Heloise, who became something of a star in theological study. Bernard found Abelard as a fitting focus for his fury, and worked hard, and at times in quite an underhand manner, to obtain the church’s condemnation of several of his writings.

Abelard already had a worthy opponent for his principal stance, ‘reason before faith’ in the saintly Anselm, later Archbishop of Canterbury who proved, in any case, to be a far better example of holiness. Bernard, who had no grounding in theology whatever, need not have taken on this fight, for which history has not rewarded him. The conflict, as ever, became ‘ad hominem,’ although it is reported that there was a reconciliation eventually.

The second major slur on Bernard’s reputation arose when top churchmen talked him into preaching the second crusade, which he was, at first, reluctant to do. The first crusade had been popular, and the west had managed to wrest several Levantine cities from the Muslims, but in the 1140’s the situation was being reversed. It was inevitable that the church would wheel out its biggest gun to gain support, and at a monastery in France, in the presence of many nobles, who would bring their soldiers along with them, Bernard preached to such effect that his store of pilgrims’ badges – white cloth crosses, ran out, and he removed his white Cistercian habit and started cutting fresh badges from that. Like many powerful preachers, he was something of a showman.

In mitigation it must be pleaded that, whereas the call for crusades usually resulted in Christians turning on their nearest perceived spiritual enemy, the Jews, Bernard forbade this in the strongest terms.

Merton’s approach to Bernard’s vocation is that, while his first hagiographer, William of St Thierry, clearly loved him, there are tell-tale signs that Bernard was aware that, whilst he dedicated himself entirely to the service of God, during his formation he came to understand that some of the gifts he possessed could be liable for rewards far greater than may be appropriate.

To his novices Merton explains that over 800 years it was necessary that things changed: Bernard in one of his letters sends a run-away monk back to his Benedictine abbot, advising him not to put him through the whole discipline prescribed for runaways: pushed by the gate-keeper into chapel to prostrate before the abbot; receiving the ‘discipline [flogging]’ during the long recitation of the ‘Miserere,’ and further prostrating himself at the feet of every monk: after this he remained, for the rest of his life, in the very lowest place in the monastery. Bernard realised, as we would today, that nobody in their right mind would think of returning to their monastery to face all that, and mediaeval music became the richer for the minstrels and goliards who were content to make an insecure living by means of worldly talents rather than returning to their monastery.

Merton suggests that, with the whole basis of spirituality having changed over this time, what is left for a saint to do is to be generous with the gifts he has, and not to try to emulate somebody else, with their individual gifting and who may have lived centuries ago in another world. This, surely, is a principle we could follow today. Francis de Sales puts it more simply: ‘you don’t pray for cherries in the autumn or for peaches in the spring: although the managers of supermarkets do their best to encourage us to do just that!

Bernard died in 1153, his reputation severely dented after the disastrous failure of the second crusade, so that, in one sense, he himself was made to carry the cross. And by so doing, became a true saint.

**\*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\***

WILLIAM & CATHERINE BOOTH are known as founders of the Salvation Army.

William was born in Nottingham in 1828, and married Catherine in 1855. His style of preaching was criticised by many of his Methodist colleagues, and in 1860 he left the church to start a denomination of his own, which spread rapidly round the world.

When we looked at the Wesleys you may recall a quote from the socialist historian E P Thompson, whose article on Methodism in his book ‘The making of the English working class’ excoriated the second generation of Methodist leaders for rapidly becoming an instrument of the middle classes, whereas the Wesleys’ original ministry was to the industrial and urban poor who had really rather been lost in the stampede for wealth and influence in C18.

There was a call to minister to the poorest which various Anglican social reformers such as the Clapham sect, Octavia Hill, and later the Barnets were beginning to address by the middle ofC19, although, as usual, there was a reaction, and the pioneering Christian Socialist F D Maurice lost his professorship at London University for his work. Interesting, then, that, as we saw last week, Anglo-Catholic clergy who couldn’t find a living otherwise, took up parish work in the slums and set up the Christian Social Union which all rather creates a dichotomy between those of all denominations who were on the side of the angels, and those who preferred to ‘pass by on the other side.’

This is roughly the tenour of a passage from Booth’s book ‘In darkest England and the way out,’ which is, frankly, an appeal for money, but made in a rather more sympathetic manner than most: he writes:

‘that you do not like the Salvation Army I venture to say, is no justification for withholding your sympathy or practical co-operation in carrying out a scheme which promises so much blessedness to your fellow men. You may not like our government, our methods, our faith. Your feeling towards us might, perhaps, be duly described by an observation that slipped from the tongue of a somewhat celebrated leader of the evangelistic world, who, when asked what he thought of the Salvation Army, replied that he; ‘did not like it at all, but he believed that God Almighty did.’

Perhaps, as an agency, we may not be exactly of your way of thinking, but that is not the point. Look at that dark ocean, full of human wrecks, writhing in anguish and despair. How to rescue those unfortunates is the question. The particular character and the methods employed, the peculiar uniforms worn by the life-boat crew, and the mingled shouting of the rescued and the rescuers, may all be contrary to your tastes and traditions. But all these objections and antipathies, I submit, are as nothing compared with the delivering of the people out of that dark sea.

Liberal Christians may well take the attitude, as many non-Christians do, that, whilst, indeed, we find aspects of the Army’s government and traditions contrary to our own’, the Salvation Army is well established in no less than 131 countries, and as the founder of AA wrote to over-enthusiastic members who imagined there was only one way of sobering up drunks: ‘Let’s be friendly with our friends. Whilst, however, one might feel that a recovered alcoholic may be free to find a spiritual path of their own, modern developments in ‘hands-on’ evangelism may find this position somewhat disingenuous, particularly when material and emotional help can emanate nowadays from drug barons and terrorists: it’s a complex ethical nut to crack.

There appear to be no NCO’s in the army; the officers begin at lieutenant. The structure of the organisation is divided into five provinces, and it’s usually either a Colonel or Commissioner heading up any one project, which can include rescue work at major disasters, such as hurricanes and earthquakes; there exist on-going projects against slavery, poverty and homelessness, including campaigns at government level.

There are eleven ‘articles of faith, ‘which would place the church on the extremity of orthodoxy, which is to say they are Trinitarian; believe in the two natures of Christ; and their order of service wouldn’t be out of place in many other Evangelical venues.

Salvationists believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, and do not regard either baptism or the Eucharist as sacraments, believing that the grace of God is available everywhere, and that too much emphasis is placed on the sacraments in other denominations, at the expense of action. They believe in a real Hell, and that homosexuality, although not a sin in itself and not amenable to change in an individual, is, however, amenable to the practice of restraint as are the sexual impulses of heterosexuals. For this reason the Army will not accept homosexual men and women as officers, a position which has attracted a good deal of flack from the LGBT lobby. Until recently marriage was only allowed between officers, but that has been relaxed of late.

E P Thomson might have turned in his grave had he seen or heard the Sally Annie brass band playing on the pavement in Piccadilly, right outside Fortnum & Mason in the days before Christmas last year – or maybe not!?