WHEN THE SAINTS…

13th of OCTOBER EDWARD the CONFESSOR

15th of OCTOBER TERESA of AVILA

16th of OCTOBER NICHOLAS RIDLEY & HUGH LATIMER

18th of OCTOBER LUKE THE EVANGELIST

KING EDWARD ‘THE CONFESSOR’ was born in 1002, the son of Ethelred [unready should rather translate as ‘poorly counselled]’. He was crowned king in Winchester on Easter day, 3rd of April 1043, but had been ruling since June 1042. The image of Edward as a pious wimp that historians have peddled over the centuries is unjust for several reasons; firstly because he had personal presence; he was taller than average, people feared his rages, and he loved hunting with dogs.

Edward was born at perhaps one of the least propitious moments in Anglo-Saxon history. His uncle, Edward the Martyr – not to be confused – had been murdered, possibly at Ethelred’s instigation, but once on the throne Ethelred had to deal with fresh invasions from a new generation of Danish Vikings, resulting in battles on sea and land which he and his followers largely mismanaged. At the death of Ethelred’s first wife, and with trouble brewing from Normandy, he took advantage of the situation to make a loveless marriage with Emma, Princess of Normandy, who bore him three brothers, the eldest of whom was Edward.

Matters with the Danes came to a head in 1014, when the future King Canute and his henchmen were bribed to go away. Until Ethelred unadvisedly signed off what is known as the St Brice’s Massacre, whereby hundreds perfectly innocent Danish citizens took refuge in St Frideswide’s Church in Oxford which the townsfolk then burnt down round their ears. Naturally enough the Danes and everybody else were outraged, and a series of battles ensued, resulting in Ethelred, Emma and the two boys, fleeing abroad under separate escort. We next hear of Edward and Alfred in Normandy, where Duke Richard’s son Robert [father of William the Conqueror] befriended them.

Meanwhile Canute had taken over as king, making a diplomatic marriage with Emma, following the death of Ethelred in 1016 and dying in 1036, when we read of Edward and Alfred making separate landings on the south coast: Edward’s men were seen off and he made his way back to Normandy, but Alfred was taken and murdered at the behest of Earl Godwin, father of our King Harold.

The English court was split into two factions after Canute’s death: Emma rooting for the succession of her son with Canute, the other backing Harold ‘Harefoot’, who died shortly afterwards. Canute’s son was weak, and in 1041 called Edward over, and may have shared the kingdom with him before his own death in June the following year.

Another misconception about Edward, then, is that he was an Anglo Saxon, whereas the last true Anglo-Saxon to rule was Edward’s father Ethelred. Edward’s mother was Norman, and after years of exile in Normandy, he spoke better French than English. His court included Normans, Bretons, Flemings, Danes and even Germans. He may have been personally pious, but so were many of his predecessors and rivals, particularly Harold Godwinson – that’s ‘our’ King Harold who died at Hastings.

In respect of Edward’s attribution of sanctity, it is important, at all events, to bear in mind that acts of piety in the Middle Ages, whilst often motivated by devotion, were also calculated as insurance against the fear of punishment in a very real physical Hell after death. The second point is that churchmen at this time often found themselves as much at home in the Mead Hall or on the battle field as in church, though there were exceptions.

By the time Edward came to the throne, his mother Emma, Canute’s widow, had acquired considerable riches and leverage in England, and clearly intended to act as the power behind the throne. It is worth remembering that there had been no love lost between mother and son; in fact, to the contrary, Emma had ignored him and had backed her son by Canute to succeed his father, passing over Edward completely, so shortly after gaining the throne Edward moved against her, confiscating her lands and property and leaving her with just enough for her needs.

Edward’s next problem was Godwin, whom Canute had raised to become second only to himself in power and influence, and whom Edward had employed to defeat Emma’s forces. Edward attempted to clip his wings, resulting in what might have been a very fierce civil war which people on both sides were, mercifully, able to prevent. As part of the negotiated settlement, Godwin, who had probably ordered the murder of Edward’s brother Alfred, was put on trial but acquitted of other serious wrongs, following which Edward was left effectively side-lined while Godwin and his son Harold ruled the roost. It was at this time that Edward concentrated on pursuing his interest in church reform.

Nobody need doubt Edward’s personal piety, and it may well be that this stood out in relation to a wise and prudent ruler such as Canute, who, while having been baptised, had a theatrical edge to his devotions, but open-handedness was a convention of nobility and kingship, and with one or two of the major players commissioning apologias for their lives, the monk who recorded the good death of Edward did rather lay it on with a trowel. Furthermore, in the complex situation that confronted Edward, it is difficult to support the assertion of John Knox that Edward was a paragon of justice, even if it is fair to assert that he preferred diplomacy to war whenever possible.

Edward’s principal claim on the hearts and minds of the English people is the foundation of Westminster Abbey, which was consecrated only a few days before his death, on Holy Innocents’ Day 1065. Apart from his personal piety which seems beyond doubt, there is very little evidence to maintain that he lived the life of a saint. England is filled with churches that were endowed with a view to keeping their founders from the flames and sulphurous smoke of the Hell that was very real for them, and such people had often acquired their wealth by less than fair means, and the best that can be said is that Edward lived no such life.

As to Edward’s legacy to the nation other than the abbey, the monk who recorded his last hours makes it clear that he nominated Harold [Godwinson] to succeed him, which led inexorably to the battle of Hastings.

TERESA of AVILA [Also known as TERESA of JESUS [1515-87], doctor of the church, and patron saint of Spain – is arguably one of the greatest saints of the Christian church.

In a nutshell: she was born into a rich aristocratic family, though her grandfather was a converted Jew who made good and bought his knighthood – so no sign of ‘old money [!!!]’ to use the French expression.

At age 7 she and her brother ran away from home in order to seek decapitation as martyrs by the Moors, before being discovered just outside the walls of Avila by an uncle; otherwise what is abundantly clear from her autobiography is that she was an attractive, outgoing girl with all the preoccupations of her class – clothes, perfumes chivalric literature, lives of the saints, etc. Her mother died when she was 11, and she was educated by the Augustinians at Avila, and flirted with the idea of becoming a nun:

‘God deliver us from sullen saints!’

At age 20 she left home to become a Carmelite Sister but suffered all kinds of difficulties with prayer which are recorded in excruciating detail in her autobiography. As the result of this elaborate detail modern neurologists have suggested that Teresa may have suffered from right temporal lobe epilepsy, though it is always dangerous to attempt a diagnosis of somebody who has been dead for 400 years. The fact is that Teresa has been regarded as one of the greatest Christian mystics of all time, and such an indisposition would not be the first instance of God having made himself known by means of individuals with serious physical or mental disorders.

Eventually Teresa’s prayer life developed to such a stage that she no longer felt she could survive spiritually in a religious institution such as her Carmelite house in which visitors, often well-to-do relatives, and friends wandered in and out at will, and the whole atmosphere militated against the prayerful relationship she was in process of working out with God, so it was well into early middle age that she came to understand and discuss with her superiors her plan to move to an institution with stricter discipline. At first she encountered overwhelming opposition so, always unsure of herself and vowed to obedience, she dropped the idea.

After several years, however, Teresa, with the acquiescence and, later, the encouragement of her confessors and counsellors, became convinced of her calling to found a new and stricter regime in a new monastery, and, with the help of a friend in whose house she had permission to stay, she finally managed to found the first of many houses for ‘discalced ‘[=barefooted] women and men.

The remainder of Teresa’s life is the story of her ups and downs in the foundation of her order, which received papal approval in time. The other side of her rich life concerned the development of her mysticism together with the voluminous writings on both facets of her gifting.

If you visit Avila, which is only a short distance from Madrid, a tour guide will probably tell you that whilst Teresa experienced many difficulties and much opposition, the fact that she had noble birth helped pull a few strings, which may well be the case because she writes very generously about everybody except ‘the devil’, but there certainly were rich acquaintances, friends and family members who put their properties and occasionally their funds at her disposal. Set against these perceived advantages, however, remains the almost insurmountable opposition Teresa experienced, not only from her male superiors and sometimes her confessors, but also at her first convent, her fellow sisters who clearly had no intention of giving up their comfortable existence. Add to this her self-doubt, serious physical illness, of whatever provenance, and the threat of the infamous Spanish inquisition, which interested itself on behalf of her opponents – and whatever advantage she may have reaped from her connections seems meagre enough.

Acquaintance with Teresa and her works is often recommended to begin with her ‘Way of Perfection,’ which is a good and relatively succinct introduction. On the other hand, what sets Teresa apart from many of the exalted and pious writings about other saints can be found in writings such as her Autobiography and her ‘Book of the Foundation’ which describes the whole process by which she managed to find houses, deal with the owners and set them up as monasteries; and this shows her superb practical common sense, the example par excellence of Jesus’ exhortation to his followers to be ‘as crafty as snakes and innocent as doves.’

‘Know that even when you are in the kitchen, our Lord moves amidst the pots and pans.’

‘Remember there must be somebody to cook the meals, and count yourself happy if you are able to serve like Martha,’ but

‘’To give our Lord a good hospitality, Mary and Martha must combine.’

The main difficulty in reading Teresa’s writings is her prolixity; She wanders off her narrative in order to pursue by-ways that it’s unwise to skip over, because there will be something there of very great spiritual or narrative value.

Her autobiography, like most accounts of personal faith journeys since Augustine, owes much to his ‘Confessions,’ which she read early on. It has to be said that for a modern reader the constant self-deprecations, often in the direst terms, can become tiresome, although she sets her conduct against the highest imaginable standards of ‘holiness,’ and a distinct advantage in reading her writings is her total emotional and spiritual honesty, although, as a role model with compassion and the most generous pastoral heart she warns;

‘To wish to act like angels while we are still on this earth is nothing but folly;’

‘To reach something good it is very useful to have gone astray, and thus we learn by experience.’

‘It is a great grace of God to practise self-examination, but too much is as bad as too little.’

Teresa’s humility is authentic: certainly her raptures and other mystical experiences cost her her health, and that without all the worry involved in her foundations, and from the depths of that humility and with very great compassion she writes:

‘Contemplation is a gift of God which is not necessary for salvation nor to earn your eternal reward, nor will anybody require you to possess it.’

‘God gives when he will, as he will and to whom he will.’ [Not entirely original but nonetheless true.] Unsurprisingly, as a reformer, a mystic and a woman, Teresa’s attitude to the church was sometimes ambivalent: ‘Cursed be that loyalty that reaches so far as to go against the law of God.’

‘The further from God; the nearer to the church: the nearer to God the further from the church.’

Unfortunately, however, the wonderful aphorism that ‘Your hands and feet are the only ones Christ has to do his work, etc’ is not found in her writings.

Another whole article could be written about Teresa’s close spiritual friendship and association with St John of the Cross, who also appears on the Anglican calendar, so it will have to wait until then.

… … … … … … …

HUGH LATYMER [1485-1555] and NICHOLAS RIDLEY [1500-55] TOGETHER WITH Thomas Cranmer, who comes up soon, were the ‘gang of three’ principals who promoted the English reformation, for all that all three were burnt at the stake for heresy in Oxford – Latymer and Ridley together. Famously Latymer exhorted Ridley: ‘Be of good comfort Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle in England by God’s grace, as [I trust] shall never be put out.’ Less famously Ridley was heard to call: ‘I cannot burn. Good people let me have more fire!’

Hugh Latymer was the son of a Leicestershire farmer who studied at Cambridge and became a Fellow of Clare Hall in 1510. He excelled in preaching, having a colloquial style that endeared him to the university, and was given a licence by Cambridge to preach anywhere in the country.

Latymer was a man of very great courage and conviction: by the instigation of Anne Boleyn he was made chaplain to the king following the rift with Rome, but in a sermon he is recorded as having Declared: ‘Latymer! Latymer! Latymer! Be careful what you say: King Henry is here … ‘Later, after a pause: ‘Latymer! Latymer! Latymer! Be careful what you say; the King of Kings is here.’

Before Edward VI he is recorded as proclaiming:

‘Take heed and beware of covetousness… Take heed and beware of covetousness…. Take heed and beware of covetousness. Should say nothing else these three or four hours?”’

And again:

‘Who is the most diligent bishop and prelate in England? I will tell you: it is the devil. He is never out of his diocese. The devil is diligent at his plough.’

As early as 1525, however, he was railing against the corruption of the mediaeval church and was suspected of heresy, appearing before Wolsey, but was presented with the living at Kington in Wiltshire, and in 1535 created Bishop of Worcester, a post he held for only four years before falling out of favour with king Henry for refusing to sign the Act of Six Articles, which were intended to maintain the church in Catholic orthodoxy. He regained favour under Edward VI and assisted Cranmer in the preparation of the 1549 prayerbook. In 1550 and again in 1552 Latymer toured the country preaching, but at the accession of Mary Tudor he was detained in the tower of London whence he was transferred to oxford to face trial by the university theologians, who condemned him, following which he was excommunicated and burnt together with Ridley.

Latymer made a significant contribution towards English Protestant piety. In another sermon he took a story from the life of St Anthony in which the holy man asked God to show him a fellow, and God sent him into town to a cobbler who practised no great asceticism, but who prayed on seeing every passer-by: ‘So that they may be saved, I, only I, perish.’

Latymer changed the story to fit his own message: St Anthony has reached such a state of holiness in his own eyes that he asks God to show him his equal. When he meets the cobbler, ‘who, I warrant, made less false stitches than cobblers do today [!]’ showed his holiness by humbly and conscientiously following his trade while his wife went about her business in the house: in the morning they prayed together, and at dinner they took their bread and cheese with thanks, and were contended: their children were well taught, and knew their Paternoster, the creed and the ten commandments. St Anthony ‘comes to himself’, an expression employed by Tyndale in his translation of the Prodigal son; in other words, Anthony is healed of his pride, a complete change in the meaning of the original story. Latymer makes the point that England has lost nothing with the suppression of the monasteries because instead of asceticism God simply requires us to live simply, keep our station, and do our duty. This is a very big change from preaching spiritual athletics.

Nicholas Ridley came from a well-off family in Northumberland, and after studying at Cambridge, the Sorbonne and Louvain, became a fellow, and later Master of Pembroke Hall. In 1535 he was appointed chaplain to Thomas Cranmer, and Bishop of Rochester in 1547. He seems to have come to Protestantism later than Latymer, and it wasn’t until King Edward’s reign that he so declared himself. He was consecrated Bishop of London in 1550, and also assisted Cranmer with the Prayer Book.

On the death of Edward in 1553 Ridley backed the wrong horse by supporting Lady jane Grey’s claim to the throne, presumably so as to prevent the accession of Mary Tudor, the Catholic, for which he was deprived of his See, excommunicated and executed.

‘It was a great pity and a lamentable thing to have seen the people in many places so loathsomely and unreligious to come to the Holy Communion and the Common Prayer … in comparison of that blind zeal and indiscreet devotion which they had aforetime to things whereof they understood never a whit.’

Ridley preached boldly on social matters and supported the poor: it is reported that before his death he gave his truss to a pauper. His preaching and love of the poor worked to such effect that the foundation of Christ’s Hospital and St Thomas’s are thought to have been inspired by him. Ridley was younger than Latymer by 15 years, and seemingly took longer to convert; perhaps his broader education in centres of markedly Catholic learning restrained him, because it seems likely that they would have become acquainted at Cambridge, which, in the 1520’s was known as the hotbed of Lutheranism. Each shared concern for social matters at a time of generalised avarice among the landed class, particularly with the release of so much monastic property.

Both men died bravely and quite unrepentant of their views, whereas when Cranmer’s turn came he proved far more willing to be flexible, for all that, having presided over the devising and issue of the Prayer book, none of them stood a ghost of a chance of saving their skins. Nevertheless, it seems a pity that subsequent generations of Anglicans seem to have been somewhat overfed on the accounts of these executions for centuries to come.

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 v1f; ch20 v5ff & 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?