**WHEN THE SAINTS…**

14th of JUY JOHN KEEBLE

15TH of JULY BONAVENTURE

16TH of JULY OSMUND

18TH of JULY ELIZABETH FERARD

19th of JULY GREGORY of YSSA & MACRINA

JOHN KEEBLE [1792-1866] is perhaps best known as one of the poster-boys for the Anglo-Catholic revival in the middle of c19, [together with John Henry Newman and Edward Pusey] but should probably be better known and celebrated as the author of hymns such as ‘blest are the pure in heart,’ and ‘New every morning.’

His other distinction was his ‘Assizes sermon’ preached to the top brass in the legal profession to remind them of the country’s Christian heritage, and to exhort them to maintain standards of justice along Christian principles. This sermon has been taken by church historians to be the trumpet blast of what is known as the Oxford Movement, or the ‘ Tractarianism;’ a small caucus of clergy from the middle of C19 who issued over 100 ‘tracts’ about various theological and social issues, mainly of a conservative nature. Keeble wrote seven of them, together with a treatise on the Eucharist.

Keeble was the son of a priest, also named John Keeble. He and his brother were educated at home by their father John, but John the younger proved such a brilliant scholar that he became a fellow of Oriel College Oxford at age 19. His book of poetry ‘The Christian Year’ [1827], which went through three hundred editions in C19, was widely admired, and earned him the professorship of poetry at oxford. He also co-edited important books on the church fathers and Richard Hooker’s ‘Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity.’

What is completely admirable in Keeble’s life is his avoidance of public office and preferment in the church. In the 1830’s he was offered three posts, but declined them on the grounds that he needed to stay with his widowed father. After his father’s death Keeble became parish priest at a church near Winchester, where he stayed until his death in 1866.

Given the influence and fame Keeble achieved outside the church, especially as a writer, he could easily have risen within the church electing, thereby, to build on his fame, but he was known to be rather shy, although it is said that when he was with his friends he could be at ease, and something of a wit.

Regardless of issues of theology and churchmanship, what makes a saint is holiness of life, and, by all accounts, Keeble was universally admired for his holiness.

God’s church needs dynamism, and the interaction of opposing views and passions: how else can it stay alive; but the life of John Keeble seems to have been a model of how to express one’s views without the hectoring, bullying and shoulder-barging that has mired the church and its reputation right back to some of the best-known fathers, and arguably even to St Paul.

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BONAVENTURE – ‘the seraphic doctor,’ is a major figure in history; theology, spirituality, mysticism, and, to a less extent philosophy.

In the upper chapel of the beautiful Franciscan spiritual H.Q. in Assisi, there is a series of stained-glass windows depicting episodes from the life of Bonaventure, including one with him alongside Thomas Aquinas, the Dominican, whose work and profile have tended rather to overshadow that of Bonaventure.

Giovanni Lecchi – Bonaventure was a nickname he received later – was born at Bagnoregio, in north central Italy between 1217 and 1220; different authorities give different dates. He is said to have been the son of a physician, when, as a child, he was seriously ill his mother made a vow to St Francis, who prayed over him, and interceded for him on several other occasions. The boy attributed his recovery to Francis, and remained convinced throughout his life that the Franciscan order had been established by Jesus Christ himself.

Bonaventure received his primary education at the Friary at Bagnoregio, and proceeded to Paris, where he joined the faculty of arts. In 1243 he became a Franciscan friar, and after extensive further study he was appointed the fifth master of the Friars’ school in 1252. His 21 years in the university of Paris finished when, at age 37, he was elected as the seventh Minister General of the fraternity which he virtually re-founded, giving it a training and administration that it had not previously known; but attempting to keep it faithful to the founder’s ideals. In 1273 he was created Cardinal Bishop of Albano, against his will, and kept the Pope’s messengers waiting while he finished the washing up. He brought about a temporary union between eastern and western churches, which had been in schism for over 200 years previously, but the following year, on 15th of July, he died during the Council of Lyons.

When we looked at the Rule of Benedict last week, it was mentioned that that of the Franciscans, ratified in 1223, was far less practical in application largely because Francis himself was something of an anarchist, and lacked either the interest or the ability to have thought through the nuts and bolts of a constitution. Moreover, one thing that had to change was his aversion to books and study: nobody in the original band of brothers - and later, sisters – was permitted to own a book!

With the exponential growth of the order after Francis’ death, and the necessity to be able to proceed from a secure base if the order was to carry out its purpose of helping the poor and supporting the church, it needed to adapt rapidly to the real world. Bonaventure’s task was to bring about these adjustments whilst seeking to maintain the ethos so beloved of Francis’ disciples.

Bonaventura believed that the most important resource for the theologian was ‘Scripture, hence:

‘In the “Liber Creaturae [the book of CREATURES[!]” which was offered to Adam & Eve for their guidance, God communicated efficaciously; when Adam & Eve abandoned their innocence, they lost the power to read this book clearly. Divine providence then saw fit to supply the further testimony of another book; the ‘Liber Scripturae, which was written in accordance with divine inspiration.’

‘Scripture’ illuminates the world, and possess the power to restore it to all of the knowledge, praise and love of God.

‘The purpose of theology is that we become virtuous and attain salvation. This is accomplished by an inclination of the will, rather than naked speculation.’

As Minister General of the order, Bonaventure maintained his predecessor’s policy regarding the selection of friars to be sent for training in theology at Paris: ‘they should be of good reputation; meek and peaceful among their confreres.’

‘Novi theology often dread the scripture itself claiming it to be as confusing, disordered and uncharted as an impenetrable forest.’ For this reason he yielded to his students’ request for guidance, and wrote his ‘Breviloquium,’ Which explores the theology of the Trinity, the creation, the fall, the Incarnation, grace, the sacraments and the last judgment. He underlines the pivotal role of Jesus Christ in redeeming and perfecting the creative order.

‘What greater act of benevolence than for the master to redeem the slave by taking the nature of a slave? This is a deed of such unfathomable goodness that no greater proof of mercy, benevolence and friendship can be imagined. …. The ‘Deus-homo’ becomes humanity’s neighbour, brother, friend and teacher; and gives himself in the Passion as the price of redemption … The perfection of the creation is matched by that of the redeemed order. …

‘As the restoring principle, [God] created humanity in an orderly fashion, so must he restore him in an orderly fashion, He must repair humanity in a way which safeguards freedom of the will, the honour of God and the order of the universe.’

Bonaventure underlines the fact that Jesus Christ suffered only once; and that his death was sufficient for all sins which lay in the past and in the future.

The body of Jesus Christ is mystically offered to the Father daily as an antidote to sin. So close is the sacrifice of the cross to that of the altar that everything in the Mass represents the Passion.

For this reason, and bearing in mind that ‘Breviloquium,’ is at least partly a training manual for the priesthood, his expectation as to the piety, purity and reverence of the celebrant is, perhaps, exalted well beyond what a merciful God might expect of a human who hadn’t just emerged from a 30-day retreat!!! A thorough and candid confession is enjoined, followed by a reading of psalms 84-5-8 and 115, with their versicles and prayers; and a mind and spirit filled with thoughts of the Passion etc.

To the aspiring theologian he warns that:

‘the reader should not believe that reading is sufficient without unction; speculation without devotion; investigation without wonder; observation without rejoicing; work without piety; knowledge without love; understanding without humility; endeavour without divine grace.’

‘In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, he is the central point of understanding’ [as the Word.] Bonaventure concludes that: ‘the human thirst for knowledge must be subordinated to the search for wisdom and holiness.’

Two very much more accessible works of Bonaventure are his ‘Journey of the soul into God,’ [1259] and ‘The spiritual journey of St Francis,’ [1260], which is Bonaventure’s account of Francis’ ascent to God by an examination of each of his spiritual gifts and virtues

The ‘journey’ illustrates Bonaventure’s use of philosophy, theology and mysticism in precisely the way he has already advocated in the quotations cited above. God has left ‘vestiges’ of himself in nature, in the human mind, and in Scripture, by which Bonaventure plots a series of steps related to the supposed six days of creation, by which time, at the Sabbath, the pilgrim is compelled to put every use of the mind to one side and simply rest faithfully IN GOD, It’s a formulation that could probably just as easily work as a plan to bring seekers to God in our own time.

As a Franciscan, with his love of the created order, and his conviction of its goodness, Bonaventure strongly opposed ascetical practices, and the notion, prevalent among some heretics in southern France at the time, that purification and purgation could only be attained by setting aside ‘the world and the flesh:’ he maintained that the Franciscan precept of poverty was a separate issue; simply a matter of living without unnecessary possessions.

The difficulty Francis had bequeathed to his disciples was that something had to be done to accommodate the ever-expanding number of friars; and the fiction that the order’s actual possessions belonged to the Pope was no long-term solution, and various disputes arose among factions of the order who wished to return to Francis’ primitive state of poverty. The ‘spirituals’ were eventually anathematised by Pope John 22nd early in the 14th century, together with the repudiation of the fiction about the order’s ‘property.’

By virtually re-founding the Franciscan order, Bonaventure had rooted it in the church and the world, and saved it from fracturing beyond repair. His theology, mysticism and holiness of life earned him the soubriquet of ‘the seraphic Doctor.’ One of his teachers, Alexander of Hales, said ‘n him, it is as though Adam never sinned.’

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OSMUND was brought to England with William the Conqueror, his mother being William’s half-sister. Very soon William appointed him as Chancellor, and Osmund took part in the compilation of the doomsday Book.

In 1072 Osmund was appointed Bishop of Salisbury and supervised the building of the cathedral at Old Sarum, which he presented to the king in 1081.

Osmund was known and admired for his lack of avarice: most of the people brought over with the conquest were acquisitive, as was William himself, so Osmund must have been pretty exceptional, although several weeks ago we were looking at Lanfranc, Osmund’s contemporary and archbishop.

Probably his most distinctive achievement was the setting up and institution of the Sarum Use, which formed the basis of most English liturgy and music until the reformation, and would have been familiar to composers such as Cornysh, Fayrfax, Taverner Ludford and Tallis, although by the time Byrd was writing plainchant had been more or less superseded by polyphonic – part – writing. Those interested enough in English church music can experience the recording of a mass as it would probably have been heard according to the Sarum Use, by The Tallis Scholars.

Osmund died in 1099, and his bones were translated to the Salisbury Cathedral that we know in 1457.

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For many years, On the other side of the Shepherds Bush roundabout in North Kensington stood St Andrew’s Convent, where some of us, who are refugees from St saviour’s, would remember the late Sr Denzel; one or two other visiting preachers, besides the somewhat more assertive Sr Gerd, who rattled John Wheeler’s cage for some months in the late 80’s before migrating to St Michael & All Angels, and thence back to the land of her birth, where news came that she’d left the order. Apart from this, the community was served for many years by a Caribbean cook whose productions warmed the hearts and spirits of its inmates and its many visitors. Those of us who remember the community and its denizens with love and admiration have ELIZABETH FERARD to thank for its foundation.

With the still recent appointment of Bishop Sarah to the diocese of London, at long last women priests can be ordained by their own bishop. It’s also good to know that back in 1861 it was one of Sarah’s predecessors, Bishop Tait of London who licenced the first deaconesses to our church.

Bishop Tait first encouraged Elizabeth to visit a deaconess institution in Germany, and three years later, in November 1861, she and a group of women were admitted by Bishop Tait to the office of Deaconess.

Elizabeth went on to found the community of St Andrew with a dual vocation, as one of deaconesses and of religious sisters. At first the community was set up in a poor parish at Kings Cross before moving to Notting Hill. When her health failed, Elizabeth passed the leadership of the community onto others, and died on Easter day 1883.

One should not forget that within the living memory of many of our congregation, the office of deaconess was as far as women were permitted to progress in the church, and, reading the account both of the first licencing, and an informal record of that first service of admittance, one would need to be practically nose-blind not to register a whiff of condescension; and what seems almost tragic is that Elizabeth; definition of the office of deaconess seems to have written into it the very limited understanding of the role of the deaconess as servant and teacher of children, that so constrained and deformed our church for over a century and a half.

Taking Phoebe as a role model for the deaconess ministry to serve the church, she, or perhaps, Bishop Tait, her eminence grise, ignores what the text of many parts of the New Testament make clear; that it was women of substance in whose houses the Apostolic church was nurtured and sustained.

The community of St Andrew ceased accepting new recruits in 1989, once women finally won their right to be ordained; and in 2002 the remaining sisters moved from their Notting Hill home to St Mary’s convent in Chiswick.

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The three Cappadocian fathers lived in what is now south-eastern Turkey during the middle and later 4th century, and were, with their different gifts and callings, highly important figures in the establishment of the main lines of orthodoxy in the eastern church, with their influence in the Latin west, but less so, because of the dearth of translations.

Basil and Gregory, together with their elder sister Macrina, were three of ten children from an aristocratic Christian family. Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea [c333-379] is the best known of the three; and seems to have been the only one of the children who had a formal academic education: He it was who argued that Christians should study the pagan philosophers to learn the practice of the virtues. But his younger brother GREGORY, was the remarkable philosopher, theologian and mystic, many of whose ideas were well ahead of his time. The third of the Cappadocians was Gregory Nazianzus, [c329-391] a friend of the family, whose principal gift was rhetoric, with his five Theological Orations succinctly summarising the Cappadocian consensus.

When their father died, it is thought that the eldest sister, Macrina, who is also celebrated today, took over the upbringing of the children on one of the family estates, which she converted into a sort of monastery. In 348 Gregory attended school at Caesarea, whether it was Basil or Macrina who instilled whatever further education Gregory may have received, it is clear that Gregory and his sister remained deeply attached throughout the rest of her life, dying in 379 only a few months after Basil. There is a deeply moving account from Gregory of Macrina’s last days that illustrate their intimacy, and Macrina’s very deep Christian faith.

Gregory had been determined to pursue a secular career as a rhetor, and declined ordination initially. When Basil asked him to write a treatise on virginity, however, he appointed his younger brother as Bishop of the small, rather out-of-the-way town of Nyssa; and although Gregory complained at being stuck in such a backwater, Basil predicted that Nyssa would receive more prestige from Gregory than it would bestow on him

Gregory had married in the early 360’s, but his wife died in 385: having already lost Basil and his beloved sister in rapid succession in 379, a truly remarkable transformation seems to have come about as Gregory worked through his profound grief. There are resonances at many levels in the following passage:

‘When we look down from the sublime words of the Lord into the ineffable depths of his thoughts, we have an experience similar to that of gazing down from a high cliff into the immense sea below. On the coastline one can often see rocky cliffs where the seaward face has been sliced off sheer from top to bottom, with the tops of the cliffs projecting outwards, forming a promontory overhanging the depths. If anyone were to look down from such a lofty height into the sea below they would feel giddy. This is exactly how any soul feels now. As it is raised from the ground by this mighty Word of the Lord: ‘Blest are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’

… To see the Lord is eternal life, and yet these pillars of faith, John, Paul and Moses, all declare it to be impossible! The vertigo in the soul this causes! Confronted by the profundity of these words, I am confounded. Is not all human hope thus destroyed? … But the Lord supports our faltering hope, just as he grasped Peter when he was in danger of sinking and stood him on the waves as though it were solid ground. If, then, the hand of the Word is extended to us also, supporting those who are at sea in the midst of conflicting speculations, we can be without fear. We are gripped by the guiding hand of the Word, who sys to us: ‘Blest are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’

Gregory seems to have passed through some kind of purgative experience through his grief, and emerges with a mysticism that initially brings him to find God within his own heart:

‘If man’s heart has been purified from every creature and unruly affections, he will see the image of the divine nature in his own beauty. I think that in this short saying the Word expresses some such counsel as this: ‘There is in you, human beings, a desire to contemplate the true God; but when you hear that the divine majesty is exalted above the heavens, that its glory is inexpressible, its beauty ineffable, and its nature inaccessible, do not despair of ever beholding what you desire. It is indeed within your reach; you have within yourselves the standard by which you apprehend the divine. For he who made you did, at the same time, endow your nature with this wonderful quality. For God imprinted on it a likeness of the glories of his own nature, as if moulding the form of a carving into wax. But the evil that has been poured all around the nature bearing the divine image has rendered useless to you this wonderful thing that lies hidden under vile coverings. If, therefore, you wash off, by a good life, the filth that has been stuck on your heart like plaster, the divine beauty will again shine forth in you … And so you see the blest vision radiant in the pure heaven of your heart.’ [Homily 6 ‘on the Beatitudes.’]

Bernard McGinn, one of the pre-eminent writers on mysticism, states that since a book in 1946, Gregory has been vindicated as one of the most penetrating and original thinkers of Greek Christianity and one of the major mystical theorists of the ancient church.

In terms of doctrine, McGinn writes that

‘in the wake of the Arian controversy the major doctrinal dispute of the Greek fourth century, the Greek fathers were forced to examine the doctrine of God with more care, and in greater depth than had hitherto been the case. The creation of Orthodox Trinitarian theology marks a watershed in the history of Christian thought; one that was bound to have an effect on all aspects of subsequent Christianity including mysticism. Gregory, the last and most subtle of the Cappadocian fathers not only played a crucial role in the development of Trinitarian theology, but also in the Christian view of the divine nature, as unlimited, and therefore incomprehensible.

‘The Life of Moses’ is Gregory’s mystical exploration of the divine through the three accounts in the Old Testament of Moses’ own encounters with God: Gregory takes Moses as the model of somebody passionately seeking to know God.

1. THE BURNING BUSH: light, which is Gregory’s image for knowledge: so stage 1 represents the limit to which reason and rational knowledge can take us towards God.
2. THE MOUNTAIN, where darkness, rather than the light of reason, must be endured/accepted
3. THE CLEFT IN THE ROCK; God shields Moses from the full sight of his glory, and all Moses is able to see when the hand is removed, is God’s ‘back,’ Moses finally understands that his longing for God will never be satisfied: nevertheless Moses is satisfied by the very things that leave his desire unsatisfied.

Gregory puts it like this:

‘Moses learns from what is said [Exodus ch33 v20] that the divine is, by its very nature, infinite; enclosed by no boundary … since what is encompassed is certainly less than what encompasses, it would follow that the stronger prevails. Therefore he who encloses the divine by any boundary makes out that the good is ruled over by its opposite … It is not in the nature of what is unenclosed to be grasped. But every desire for the good which is attracted to that assent constantly expands as one progresses in pressing onto the good. Never to reach such saitiety is truly to see God.

Because God is an infinite being, the desire to know God is an infinite process, but Gregory sees this as more satisfying than some beatific vision: it is better to travel than to arrive!

This intellectual dynamic is paralleled by a moral one. Humanity is the only part of creation in which God places his image, so that, because there is a part of human creation that is, literally, not of this world, human beings have an intrinsic worth, lacking the rest of creation This idea obviously imposes certain obligations on us both in relation to ourselves and others.

To ourselves we owe the effort to overcome the deficiencies in our likeness to God: We are unable to contemplate God directly and morally our free will has been compromised by the passions. Thus we must strive for intellectual and moral perfection:

But, because Gregory was committed to the idea that all humans have a unique value that demands respect, Gregory was an early and vocal opponent of slavery and also of poverty.

1. Only God has the right to enslave humans, and he chooses not to do so, and it
2. was God who gave humans free will and how dare anyone compromise another’s free will by enslaving them
3. As humans who were created in the divine image, we are all radically equal.

Therefore it is hubristic for anybody to arrogate authority over others!

But Gregory goes on to state that poverty is inconsistent with the rulership bestowed on humankind and its creation. Both slavery and poverty sully the dignity of human beings by degrading them to a station below that to which they were rightfully born.

Very few of Gregory’s writings were translated into Latin, so that his influence there was limited, but the 9th-century philosopher and theologian John Scotus Eriugena, a contemporary of ALCUIN at the court of Charlemagne, based his interesting speculations on those of Gregory, and writers such as the 5th-century Syrian monk known as Pseudo-Dionysus carried forward Gregory’s apophatic - negative – mystical path to God, which, in turn, influenced many writers on spiritual matters in both east and west through the middle ages.