**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

14TH of DECEMBER JOHN of the CORSS

17TH of DECEMBER EGLANTINE JEBB

JOHN of the CROSS was born Juan de Yepes, in 1532, the son of a poor weaver, and he never forgot his background. His father had come from a rich merchant family collecting the work of weavers like Juna’s mother, who worked in a ‘cottage industry.’ The big merchant’s son fell for the humble weaver, married her and his father cut him off from the family so that the couple struggled in what some commentators describe as ‘genteel poverty,’ but it is not clear what distinction they make by the use of the word. The couple had three sons, of whom Juan was the youngest. Luis died young, but Francisco, the eldest, had learning difficulties, and Juan remained deeply attached to him throughout his life.

When Juan was still a toddler his father died, and Catalina was left to bring up the two remaining sons as a single parent; her father-in-law refused to support the family. Juan remained forever devoted to his mother. Although no physical weakling, he never grew taller than five feet.

Catalina got her son into the Jesuit catechism school at Medina del Campo, where the family now lived. The nuns soon realised he was bright, and Juan was sent to the university at Salamanca, at that time the finest in Spain. He learned poetry and literature there as well as religious studies; and would have been influenced by the tradition of students singing poetry and ballads. John of the Cross is famous as a poet quite apart from his influence on Christian spirituality: he is ranked among the top poets in Spain.

Having been educated by the Jesuits, whose influence he continued to value, among the 12 monastic houses at Medina del Campo, where the family lived, Juan chose to enter the Carmelites, a community, originally of hermits who had formed in the Holy land in the 13th century, from whence they were driven out by the Muslims, and spread over Europe. Following a conference in England at the end of the 13th century, they discerned that God required them to transform to an order of friars, serving their communities and spreading the Gospel, whilst maintaining what they could of their contemplative origins.

Juan had already been working for the Jesuit foundation where he had received his primary education, and now he took service in a hospice for whose funding he begged in the streets, and attended patients as what we would call an orderly, so that practical charity was an essential part of his formation, however tempting it may be to think of John of the Cross as a pure contemplative. Bearing this in mind, it is perhaps easier to understand his having opted for the Carmelites, and another major influence was a book of Carmelite history by a Catalan named Philip Ribot, which used to be read at Teresa’s houses during mealtimes, and contained many and varied exciting anecdotes.

At this time one of his professors was Luis de Leon, another famous theologian and spiritual director whose sharp tongue and arrogance rather made him his own worst enemy and got him into trouble with the inquisition, but it is important to understand that there was a whole constellation of important Christian stars in 16th-century Spain as well as the big three; Ignatius, Teresa and John himself. For whatever reason, perhaps the atmosphere around Luis, John chose not to become an academic theologian, although it seems clear that he could have done had he so chosen. As it was the authorities at the Carmelite house in Salamanca placed appointed John student leader, helping and supervising his fellows in their study.

At his profession, Juan de Yepes took the name of Juan de San Matthias, and it was not until his ordination and his association with Teresa that he took the name John of the Cross. Incidentally the saint whom we know as Teresa of Avila is known in Spain by her adopted name Teresa of Jesus.

Teresa had been for some time seeking friars who would take care of her nuns’ formation and spiritual direction, and she had heard of John. At the time of their first meeting John had been contemplating a change to the Carthusians, but Teresa convinced him to stay and help with her reforms, which John agreed to do on condition that they got on with the job, so that Teresa took John to visit her foundation at Valladolid, and soon realised that he understood exactly what she wanted to achieve.

After 20 years in the same monastic foundation, Teresa had realised that she needed an environment of greater and more fervent spirituality, but she went about things in a single-minded way that attracted criticism and enmity from the Carmelites of origin, and whilst she had to deal with much of this, John no doubt presented a far softer target for the conservatives, and he was in his cell praying when some of his enemies, together with several armed men broke in, kidnapped him and brought him 60 miles away to Toledo, where they imprisoned him in very rough conditions. The story goes that each week he would be made to take bread and water from the refectory floor after which he would be encircled by the rest of the brothers and whipped in turn by each of them, the scars remaining on his back for the rest of his life.

After six months the regime changed and it seems likely that a new jailor saw to it that his conditions improved, and probably facilitated his escape after another three months. It is difficult to imagine how a seriously weakened prisoner could make a rope, let himself down by it and clamber over various roof tops to safety, but that is the story. He made it to a convent where he was hidden and looked after, but after a few days only, and still unwell, he travelled down to Andalusia where he remained for ten years, travelling between foundations and yearning to return to Castile. In 1580 Teresa obtained King Philip II’s intervention to end the struggles among the Carmelites, to separate the reformed – discalced – Carmelites from the others to create them a new order.

John was appointed prior in several of the monasteries in Andalusia, but in 1588 after a chapter meeting an opponent of his was appointed Abbot General, and John was left with no office, an insignificant presence living among nuns who, nevertheless, loved and valued him. Part of the ‘conspiracy’ against him was to pack him off to Mexico with another 10 monks, but while in process of selecting them his health gave way and he was clearly unfit to travel.

A very sick man, John was taken into a monastery that was entirely unknown to him under the direction of an abbot whose nose he had put out of joint some years earlier, and who mistreated him, claimed that the house could not afford essential medication, and made his life hell. John forgave him, at which point Abbot Francisco came onside with appropriate expressions of penitence, and John was transferred nearer home, where he died, at last in 1591 aged 49.

It is probably significant that it was during the worst times of John’s life – in prison in Toledo and then confined in a hostile environment towards the end of his life, - that he wrote some of his finest and most deeply mystical poetry.

There is a whole collection of his sayings:

‘At the end we shall be examined in love.’

‘Where there is no love, put love, and love will come.’

St John of the Cross is hailed as one of the greatest spiritual writers of all times, and as a Doctor of the Church, but his canonisation took a while.

John is probably most famous for his guidance through ‘The dark night of the soul,’ which has become routinised by pretentious people as signifying deep depression, or even just a difficult phase, but that is not what it is at all. Most of us will, mercifully, never have to experience or worry about it, because it belongs solely to the higher reaches of mysticism to which only a very few of us are ever called. We should be reminded, at Teresa stated, that mysticism is not an essential prerequisite of holiness, neither will it be required of anybody.

For most of us, however, the first chapter of John’s account of ‘The Dark Night’ has a really useful account of some of the traps and snares of the spiritual life, and could be a thoroughly profitable area for self-examination at a time like Advent or Lent. It is written in very clear language and nobody need be afraid of reading or working from it. It deals with aspects of our spiritual journey that can become seriously distracted by the procession of what Christian teaching refers to as ‘The seven deadly sins’ and some of their secondary manifestations.

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EGLANTINE JEBB [1876-1928] was founder of the Save the Children’ fund.

She studied at oxford and became a teacher until ill health compelled her to resign, after which she spent her time and energy in charitable works.

In 1913 she went to Macedonia to help refugees in the Balkan wars. After the First World War she and her sister Dorothy Buxton founded the ‘Save the children’ fund, originally aimed to help children who were suffering in the post-war famine in Europe.

Apart from the political humiliation of Germany after the first world war, one of the consequences of the allied blockade of Germany and Austria was the most appalling famine: Hector Munro, a doctor, was persuaded by Eglantine to accompany her to Vienna, where he reported that women suffered spontaneous fractures of hips, because their bones had lost all solidity: children were dying in the streets and babies were being thrown into the Danube or left at hospitals where they were ranged on shelves to die.

Eglantine, who was deeply religious, approached the Archbishop of Canterbury on the basis of this report and, like all the important statesmen who had other things to do, he refused to make an appeal to the church. Accompanied, once more, by Munro, Eglantine then gained an interview with Pope Benedict XV, who had been universally excoriated for his position during the war, and, in an interview of two hours, seizing the opportunity for a positive initiative, he not only agreed to have an appeal made throughout the whole Catholic church, but published and encyclical to the effect that support must be given to children regardless of race or creed. Eglantine recorded that the Pope seemed desperately lonely to her and that she wished to comfort him. After this the Archbishop could hardly do less, so that appeals went out through the Orthodox and free churches as well.

On Holy Innocents day 1919, collections were made throughout the whole Christian world but eglantine, assisted by some social workers, was determined to formulate a charter of children’s’ rights, which not only spotlight the duties of adults in relation to children, but equally stress the duty of children to exercise their talents in the service of humanity. In 1924 the ‘Geneva Declaration’ was adopted by the League of Nations. Now at the height of her career, Eglantine preached an exhortatory sermon at its instigation in Geneva, and died there, much lamented in 1928.

DECLARATION OF GENEVA

The present declaration of the rights of the child, commonly known as the ‘Declaration of Geneva’, men and women of all nations, recognising that humankind owes to the child the best that it has to give, declare and accept it as their duty, that beyond and above all considerations of race, nationality or creed:

1. THE CHILD must be given the means requisite for its normal development, both materially and spiritually.
2. THE CHILD that is hungry must be fed; the child that is sick must be nursed; the child that is backward must be helped; the delinquent child must be reclaimed, and the orphan and the waif must be sheltered and succoured.
3. THE CHILD must be the first to receive relief in times of distress.
4. THE CHILD must be put in a position to earn a livelihood, and must be protected against every form of exploitation.
5. THE CHILD must be brought up in the consciousness that its talents must be devoted to the service of other fellow men and women.