**WHEN THE SAINTS…**

Saints ARE very thin on the ground this week!

19th of OCTOBER HENRY MARTYN

--------------------- FRIDESWIDE

25th of OCTOBER CRISPIN & CRISPINIAN

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 Tuberculosis 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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The life of FRIDESWIDE is virtually unknown, although she was a contemporary of the Venerable Bede living from 680-727, the daughter of Mercian King who endowed a double monastery of which Frideswide became the first Abbess. The nascent town of Oxford grew up around her shrine, and the university adopted St Fridewides as its own church.

Unfortunately the church became known in 1002 when King Ethelred [the ill-advised] signed off on a decree to kill off as many Scandinavians as people could find, and while about 30 Danes were taking refuge in the church the townspeople burnt it down round their ears. In C12 the monastery was re-founded for Augustinian canons, and her relics translated twice, until, in the early C15 her cult was formally adopted by Oxford University as their Patron Saint.

In C16 Cardinal Wolsey demolished the monastery in order to build his own foundation of Cardinal College, which became Christ Church, built on the same site; but the shrine was spared, only to be desecrated in 1535 by William Calfhill, a Calvinist Divine determined to put an end to the veneration of saints, so that Frideswide’s bones were deliberately mixed up with those of Catherine Dammartin, wife of a Zwinglian former professor of divinity. In 1548 St Frideswide’s shrine, or what was left of it, became the centre of the cathedral for the new Diocese of Oxford.

Two bays of Frideswide’s shrine were demolished when Wolsey demolished the monastery, but although her relics have been irretrievably lost, recently some remains of the shrine have been discovered in a well at Christ Church, and restoration has taken place.

The only story we have is a legend by William of Malmsbury that as a young woman she was betrothed, but, in a scenario that occurs time and again, she refused to get marry, and fled into a forest to evade her fiancé’s rather too persistent refusal to take ‘no’ for an answer. When she had almost been captured and despaired of her resolution she prayed hard, and her tormentor was suddenly blinded, only regaining his sight once he had come to his senses, a perfectly understandable allegory.

The truth is that we have not the first idea of Frideswide as either human being or abbess, but the story gives you some idea of how cults arise and how some manage to cling on, often more by luck than anything to do with divine action.

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CRISPIN and CRISPINIAN were shoemakers, made out to be Roman nobles but probably not – who preached the Gospel in Gaul – some say Soissons, where the relics are supposed to have been buried.

Like St Paul who was a tent-maker, which probably means leather-worker, these two plied their trade so as not to become dependent for alms on their faithful. Obviously they must have had some success for them to have been put to death by the authorities in the reign of Emperor Diocletian in 285.

And that’s all we know about Crispin and Crispinian: and the only reason why Shakespeare brings in St Crispin’s day for Henry V’s great speech before the battle of Agincourt is that there is a highly unlikely legend that the brothers took refuge and worked in Faversham, where a pub stands in Preston Street that used to be visited by pilgrims up to the 17th century.

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BACKGROUND: THE PERSECUTIONS UNDER DIOCLETIAN

Between 235 and 284 there were between 20 and 25 emperors. It’s excusable to as imprecise as this because nobody can agree absolutely as to who counted as an emperor as opposed to a mere chancer trying his luck. Practically all these characters met violent deaths, whether on the battle field, in captivity, murder by palace staff or even family members, or, in some cases, being torn to pieces by an angry mob. There were invasions and threats of invasion from Persians, Goths and constant trouble on the borders, particularly from the German tribes.

All this fighting required soldiers and an army needed bureaucracies all of which had to be paid for; so that taxes were raised as high as provincial governors dared raise them, and silver currency was devalued four times within this period, so that it is estimated that between 256-80 inflation may have reached 1.000% and coinage carried so little value and confidence that even government itself eventually refused to accept their taxes in hard but useless currency.

In 284 an element within the Roman Army proclaimed a general named Diocletian as emperor after the murder of the last one. From then until 298 the new man was involved in dealing with invasions and civil wars that erupted from one end of the empire to the other. By this time, after 14 years of fire-fighting, Diocletian had dealt with every threat, both from invasions and from attempts to overthrow and replace him, and, at long last, having almost miraculously survived all this, he was ready to instigate some changes that would secure not only his own position, but those of his successors.

One important change was to shore up his own position as leader. When Octavius Caesar won his way to sole rulership he adopted the name Augustus, and styled himself Princeps, which carries the sense of ‘first among equals,’ much as our Prime Minister’s style was originally intended to, and ‘First Minister’ in Scotland more accurately carries that sense. Moreover Augustus left the structure of the old republic in place, for all that it acted as nothing more than the smile on the Cheshire cat. By the end of the third century this had clearly worn very thin, and what had become, in effect, anarchy, had to be checked in order to save the empire [in fact, of course, it merely bought it another couple of centuries before its final demise.] Diocletian, then, stepped up his profile by styling himself ‘Dominus et Deus,’ [lord and god], and minimised the occasions for his public appearances, and wrapped them in the most elaborate ceremony when they did occur. You can see what’s happening.

Having been almost run ragged for 14 years fire-fighting, Diocletian came to understand that the empire had become far too large for one ruler to be everywhere he might be needed to deal with an emergency. He therefore came upon the quite enlightened idea to split the territories in a straight line from east to west, taking the eastern half for himself. He would govern with two senior emperors – ‘Augusti.’ Supported by two apprentices – ‘Caesars’ – who would take over when the Augusti chose to step down, and the Caesari, in turn would choose their own successors and so on … When Diocletian stepped down in 305 in order to pursue his hobby of growing cabbages, he persuaded Constantine, his cohort, to do so, but the upshot was another civil war among the four new bosses.

As for Economics, Diocletian managed rampant inflation by fixing maximum prices for every single item that a Roman citizen could need or wish to acquire, and the result was a thriving black market.

The principal aim, of course, was ultimate social control, so that civil servants were made to wear military garb and respond to orders in a spirit of military discipline: moreover many professions were made compulsorily hereditary so that a sort of caste system was established.

Keeping the gods on the government’s side was not simply a matter of piety: they would send good harvests, support the ‘right’ side in a battle; tell you the future etc: it wasn’t a matter of personal piety leading to pie in the sky when you die: religion was largely political and civil; the Romans were far more superstitious both personally and in public life than we might imagine judging from the efficiency they show in so many practical fields such as engineering and military life. Religion was almost purely insurance! Everyone was to sacrifice in order to keep the gods onside, to insure good harvests, good advice and guidance for the future; if any individual or group of individuals refused to sacrifice the Gods would get the hump and there would be nasty consequences, so that it was perfectly acceptable to deny the existence of the gods; many Romans did and were extremely ‘disrespectful’ in doing so, but not to go through with sacrificing to them was a civil offence, because it might affect the whole community or worse, the empire itself. Individuals had their household gods to whom, on the whole, they were dutiful and loyal, but public religion was in a different dimension altogether.

In this regard it was unthinkable for a ruler to be threatened by a small religious minority that had come from nowhere, whereas the Jews, who had a dispensation not to sacrifice, were an established religious body who had earned some respect and a few proselyte followers among high-class Romans, whereas if you recall how Rastafarians were viewed when they first came on the scene, by people who regarded themselves as ‘cultured,’ you may have some idea how educated Romans might have viewed Christians. The whole philosophical stance, such as it was, had no interest for them: poverty was a misfortune, and rather shameful; one wouldn’t give alms in order to gain brownie points when the chief ambition of anybody once they’d acquired money would be honour, public recognition and influence, so that giving would be of public buildings or other facilities with the name of the donor well to the fore. Humility got you nowhere. An educated Roman would look with contempt on the bad Greek in which the majority of the Gospels are written.

From the end of the first century it became illegal to actually be a Christian, and whilst there were occasional outbursts of persecution, on the whole the government’s policy was ‘don’t ask; don’t tell,’ and they were not always too impressed by neighbours carrying out a grudge by trying to dob someone in.

The brunt of these persecutions, in any case, was unlikely to fall principally on those sections of Roman society who felt secure where they were: it was slaves, freedmen and women; foreigners and the poor who were attracted to a faith community where everyone was said to be equal, and poverty and humility were not seen as useless and shameful.

Diocletian, determined as ever to carry out his policy as thoroughly as possible, allowed tax breaks to provinces in proportion to how many Christians they could kill. In the market-place, people might sprinkle goods with the blood of sacrificial victims and watch for who jumped away in repulsion, and there was your Christian.

In the middle ages, of course, similar underhand tricks were perpetrated by Christian authorities in order to catch Jews who may not have converted from their hearts; this happened principally in Spain and Portugal. If you see a recipe for pork and mussels, for instance, there is no special gastronomic frisson to be had from such a combination, but it served to catch ‘Maranos,’ Jews who had only pretended to convert and who were more often than not victims of spiteful neighbours; but such dirty tricks go right back to the book of Judges, which gave birth to our term ‘Shibboleth.’ ‘

‘Plus ca change; plus c’est la meme cochonerie!!!’