**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

23rd of NOVEMBER CLEMENT of ROME

25th of NOVMEBER ISAAC WATTS

28th of NOVEMBER CATHERINE of ALEXANDRIA

30th of NOVEMBER ANDREW the APOSTLE

CLEMENT of ROME is one of the APOSTOLIC FATHERS, together with Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp and one or two anonymous authors, who were so called because it is more than likely that they were acquainted with at least some of the apostles. Other than that we know absolutely nothing about Clement. In one of the seven letters of Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, he refers to Clement as having died celibate.

Clement is known only for his few surviving letters to various church communities, the most famous of which is to the Corinthians, and it is of particular interest for several reasons. Experts believe it may have been written in or around 95 C E, which makes it roughly contemporary with the final production of John’s Gospel. Clement does not sign his name in the letter, but from later sources we learn that he was the author and that, in the Pauline tradition, he sent envoys along with it to expound its meaning.

There is no exact date for Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, but they would surely have been written to the generation prior to that addressed by Clement. The principal issue of the letter is that there has been something of a rebellion by some younger church members who have evidently been dissatisfied with their leaders and overthrown them. The matter has reached Clement in Rome, but it becomes clear that somebody has already sought his advice, so that it would be unfair to think of him as interfering. The fact that advice has been sought from Rome, and that Clement certainly writes from a position of somewhat fatherly authority indicates that, even by the end of the first century a structure of church order not dissimilar from our own had already begun to develop and it is not unlikely that Clement may have been a Bishop.

The letter, consisting of 60 short chapters, opens with some heart-felt praise for the well-known faith, hospitality and warm-heartedness of the Corinthian church and its members, but makes clear that something very bad has happened that will bring all this into disrepute.

In a kindly but firm tone Clement makes it clear that upsetting existing church order is quite intolerable, because it has been set up by God himself. He then trawls through the Old Testament, there being no New Testament canon yet – citing instances of rivalry, obedience and, finally, humility. Apart from the matter of church order, his other concern is for church unity.

Whilst Clement does refer to bishops, presbyters and deacons he maintains that God promulgated bishops from ancient times, which is certainly not evident from anything he might have found in the Old Testament, but at this time, just a little more than a decade since Christians had ceased to be regarded as a Jewish sect, it is likely that a specifically Christian hermeneutic had barely evolved, although the other apostolic fathers appear to be familiar with some, at least, of Paul’s Epistles. Clement mistakenly sees Moses as a bishop, which, in the circumstances, is perfectly understandable.

What is common among Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp is that they endorse what appears to have already developed as a chain of authority consisting of bishops, presbyters and deacons, and all three regard obedience to this structure as first priority. Ignatius, for example, in his seven letters to various churches, exhorts church members to follow their bishops in all things, and in one case has to go out of his way to stress that even if a bishop is a comparatively young man there are instances from the bible to show that the appointment of youth over age has occasionally worked out.

The other priority these three leaders have in common is a general warning to uphold church unity and not go after teachers of doctrines other than those they have been taught; something that also preoccupied Paul.

We do know, of course, from Acts, that there were deacons in apostolic times, and that leaders tended to emerge according to charismatic gifts and the ability to teach. What Clement makes clear, however, is that by this time it is those who have faithfully distributed the sacraments and led blameless lives who are to be loved and respected as leaders, and he goes on to warn that it is no slight sin to disregard or replace them because they are appointed by God’s will, first through Jesus, next through the apostles, and down to those leaders appointed prayerfully by them.

If we go back to the appointment of Barnabas to mentor Paul during what is known as ‘Paul’s first missionary journey,’ there is a constituency in Antioch who must have been church elders, who chose them after lengthy prayer, but we do not read of presbyters at such an early stage in church administration. Things had moved on since, by the end of the first century there are presbyters throughout the whole church. Moreover if you remember the apparent power struggle between Barnabas, the experienced and senior mentor of the more Charismatic Paul, you will recall that it was Paul who won out, although, once established as leader in his own right, he had terrible trouble maintaining his position at times not least among the Corinthians themselves.

The letter of Clement fails altogether to even mention charisma, either as a qualification for leadership or, indeed, as of being of any great importance, although he does concede that individual church members should be content with exercising their God-given ministries. From the standpoint of church order, then, tongues, ecstasy and even prophetic utterance have given way to a restrained and well-ordered service, something that Paul himself was already advocating in his own letters to the Corinthians, but 100 years later when Tertullian was consecrated bishop in Africa he was expected to be familiar both with the formal liturgical expression of the faith as well as the charismatic. None of these three writers mention the latter at all in their letters, so it is easy to understand why more conservative church historians have argued that the Holy Spirit ceased her ecstatic manifestations after Paul’s generation, though it seems more likely that such practices may have survived in specific areas.

What we can glean from this is what we already knew; that church leaders often found the expression of the gifts of the spirit rather inconvenient, and tended to discourage them, which, of course, could conceivably have been precisely the issue in Corinth. Without impetus from the young how could a church community evolve? Bear in mind, also, that those who had become elders in the Corinthian church by 95 were likely to have been the very people who had been giving Paul a headache when they were young and had known him as a charismatic leader, but who had doubtless become the proud guardians of his letters, so you can probably imagine the position of the younger bloods, who, in turn, wanted to move on and take part in leadership.

It is interesting to think that Rome was already beginning to exercise authority over other churches, but probably premature to think of Clement as Pope because there is no sign of undue deference from Ignatius, for example, when he writes to the church there. Rome was still very much the capital of the whole empire, and with Peter and Paul having been martyred there the Roman church carried a certain amount of prestige. By the middle of the third century Cyprian was in close communication with the Church of Rome, but Ignatius was Bishop of Antioch, which had put down equally firm Christian roots to those in Rome, and probably felt itself on equal terms. What Cyprian had in common with Rome was the Latin language.

In the late 4th century Leo the Great was quite definitely asserting the primacy of the Roman See and his own position as bishop, over other contenders for church leadership, but in Clement’s time it might be more appropriate to think of his position as more one of mentor, since, for all his appropriation of fatherly authority he is not yet adopting the voice of a ruler, as, for instance, did Polycarp, who specifically states: ‘Although I am a bishop I do not speak to you as ruler…’

All this probably enhances Clement as an attractive, kind, fatherly figure who was obviously loved and respected by all parties in Corinth, since, having sought his friendly advice, not only did they sit up and take notice, but had his letter read on Sundays for years to come, and had it disseminated and copied into several languages.

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ISAAC WATTS [1674-1748] is best known as a non-conformist hymn-writer, many of whose productions are still sung today: ‘when I survey the wondrous cross,’ ‘’Jesus shall reign,’ and ‘O God, our help in ages past.’ Together with Phillip Dodderidge and the Wesleys a repertoire including some very attractive hymns replaced the somewhat dreary diet of metrical Psalms that was current until that time among non-conformist congregations.

He was born in Southampton, the son of a schoolmaster and clothier, and educated at the local grammar school, where he was so bright that a patron offered to pay for him to attend university, but he preferred to study at the Dissenting Academy at Stoke Newington [1690-4] which may well have been a better choice at the time: certainly it was a broader curriculum and the experience stayed with him all his life.

After holding a position as a private tutor he was appointed assistant [1699] and then full pastor [1702] to the Independent Congregation at Mark Lane, London, but his health deteriorated, and from 1703 onwards his pastoral duties fell increasingly to his own assistant. He resigned in 1712 and spent the rest of his life at Albany Park, Stoke Newington.

In 1719 he opposed the Imposition of the Doctrine of the Trinity on dissenting ministers, so it is suggested that he may have tended to Unitarianism in later life.

Watts was a Calvinist, in a way that modern readers might find rather offensive:

‘Lord I ascribe it to thy grace

And not to chance, as others do

That I was born of Christian race

And not a heathen or a Jew.’

But within the very narrowly defined limits of his time, his spirituality was of a positive nature, and he wrote consciously in order to interest and change the lives of the poor and uneducated, and, like the Wesleys, he showed concern for social issues, and particularly the poor and oppressed.

There was little or no asceticism in his teachings; he published books of sermons, texts on education and even logic. He seems to have been a man of the world, not showing contempt for learning, but merely convinced that learning of whatever kind would not answer the deeply felt spiritual questions of life.

‘Christianity does not abridge us of the common comforts of flesh and blood nor may an unreasonable restraint upon any natural appetite, but it teaches us to live like men and not like brutes; to regulate and manage our nature with its desires and inclinations, so as to enjoy life in the most proper and becoming manner; to eat, drink, taste the bounties of God’s providence, to the honour of our creator, and to the best interest of our souls.’

‘there is nothing wrong with mirth and merriment as long as they are conformed within the limits of virtue …’ but our response to the Gospel may change this and put it into a different perspective: he maintains that a Christian, once converted, would pursue God with the same vigour that the rest of humanity chases after its own earthly pursuits.

‘The soul that loves God is ready to see and taken notice of God in everything. He walks through the fields; he observes the wonders of divine workmanship in every different tree, on his right hand and on his left; in the herbs and flowers that he treads with his feet; in the rich diversity of shapes and colours and ornaments of nature, he beholds and admires his God in them all.’

‘He sees the birds in their airy flight or perched upon the branches, and sending forth their various melody. He observes the grazing flocks and the larger cattle in their different forms and manners of life. He looks down upon little insects and takes notice of their vigorous and busy life and motions, their shining bodies, and their golden or painted wings. He beholds and admires his God in them all: in the least things of nature, he can read the greatness of God, and it is what of God he finds in the creature that renders creatures more delightful to him. Creatures are of his steps to help him to rise towards God.’

Then he goes into the wonder of the cross that he expresses in his well-known hymn.

In his 19th sermon Watts writes;

‘the grace of the Gospel, which was typified by the ark of Noah, takes in all manner of animals, clean and unclean; and saves them from the deluge of divine wrath that shall come upon an ungodly world. But there is this difference, that the brutes went out of the ark with the same nature they brought in, and those that come under the protection of this Gospel by faith, they are in some measure changed; they are refined they are sanctified, for wolf that came in is turning into a lamb and the raven by degrees becomes a dove; surely the Gospel has begun to make them so, for it has begun their salvation.

 But, significantly for us, he goes on:

‘Reformation of all kinds, whether in families or churches, in cities or nations, demands a good degree of resolution and courage. It is a brave and daring enterprise to stem the torrent of the rage we live in, and to attempt to change the vicious customs of a city or nation.’

In some circles today the writing of four lines of a hymn that was, presumably, sung without the smallest squeak of dissent by those for whom Watts wrote it, would disqualify him from whatever canon of saints we may wish to celebrate, but far more vituperative things were written against heathens and Jews by people who have long been regarded as some of the greatest saints. Watts had much to say of beauty and value to our time, and his hymn-writing has enriched and assisted many generations in their worship and doubtless kept them from the less attractive expressions of Evangelical worship and spirituality.

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CATHERINE of ALEXANDRIA is the one with the wheel.

Like Cecilia, there is not the slightest evidence for her existence either in martyrologies around the 4th century, and her highly fanciful story comes from the ninth, and was taken up by the ‘Golden Legend’ and later by crusaders.

The Oxford Dictionary of the Saints wastes nearly two columns recounting her myth, because it is as much a reference for art as for church history, and there are many churches and artworks created in her honour, including the first ever mystery play in England, performed in Dunstable in 1110. Very sensibly, if tardily, Catherine’s cult was supressed in 1969, but has since grown back.

We looked at some aspects of martyrdom in the article about Cyprian of Carthage, wading through the hagiographic treacle, it is possible to distinguish other true martyrs from the rest: Cyprian was Bishop of Carthage, and on the first occasion of persecution he chose to avoid interrogation on the ground that somebody had to be around to exercise leadership: caught in the middle of a fresh persecution he had no alternative to coming forward. In the famous account of Polycarp’s martyrdom the 86-year-old had actually moved from Smyrna into the countryside and was only discovered because one of his household betrayed him under torture: once discovered, he would have handed the authorities a huge propaganda coup had he denied his faith.

Authentically holy martyrs do not seek their death; martyrdom is a charism awarded by God to those to whom he allows it and not a crown to seek for self-glorification or a P R coup.

The three best-known bishops who suffered under Mary could not have saved themselves even had they recanted, and the same is perhaps true of More and Fisher, who had to calculate the propaganda value to Henry VIII had they even attempted to do so. Cranmer did recant, but Mary had him burned nevertheless, so that he withdrew his recantation at his execution.

Jacques de Molay, master of the Knights Templar confessed, under torture, to all kinds of revolting trumped-up charges brought against him and the order by Philip IV of France in 1306 when he wanted to grab their money and lands. Jacques was not a brave man and proved himself a deplorable leader, first confessing under torture and then recanting, and thence back and forth. In the end when execution was inevitable, he finally went back on all his confessions, knowing that as leader a conviction would give the whole order into Philip’s avaricious and bloodstained hands. Was he a martyr or merely a victim of appalling theft and injustice?

Both Charles I and his bullying Archbishop William Laud feature on the Anglican calendar. Nobody ever doubted that Charles was personally devout, and that he met his death with exemplary charity and fortitude, but his arrogance as king, and deceit in breaking his word to his captors both brought about and unnecessarily prolonged the civil war, not to mention that his piety proved to be of insufficient staying power not to sacrifice Laud to the block to save his royal hide, so that despite personal piety we might be tempted to think that effectively Charles brought about his own downfall.

People like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Oscar Ramiro; Archbishop Luwum of Uganda and Martin Luther King are true martyrs, and it probably behoves us to concentrate our sympathies and prayers on people like these, and the dire situations in which they found themselves, rather than harking back to people whose lives and historical contexts are not always clear to us.

These two weeks in November with Cecilia and Catherine are, perhaps, the nearest the calendar comes to a silly season.

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ANDREW the APOSTLE was Peter’s brother and a partner in the small fishing business apparently run by Zebedee. The synoptic Gospels – Mark, Matthew and Luke, have little enough about him, which must have been difficult, given that the other three fishermen came to constitute Jesus’ inner circle; why was he not included? When the disciples started quarrelling about who was the greatest, Andrew must have hurt rather badly had he been of a disposition to be concerned about such matters. At all events, his name occurs in the first four of all the lists of disciples.

Perhaps, however, Andrew was the affable younger brother; where he occurs in John’s Gospel it’s as a ‘people person;’ one to whom others come, or who does some of the important backroom stuff, and as such he would have been a liaison; perhaps a kind of P A for that inner circle?

In John’s Gospel the four fishermen have been disciples of the Baptist, and it is Andrew who clocks Jesus as being exactly who the Baptist says he is, and brings Peter to Jesus, which, as William Temple states in his ‘Notes on John’s Gospel,’ of itself this is no small matter.

There are only two other vignettes, both of which come in John. Firstly at the feeding of the five thousand [John ch6] it is Andrew who seems to introduce the boy whose bread and dried fish provided the basis for the miracle, and secondly, at ch12 v20 some Greeks [Hellenistic Jews ‘up to celebrate the feast] express a wish to Phillip that they be introduced to Jesus: Phillip contacts Andrew and both go to Jesus, who, by this time, is too preoccupied to pause, a highly unusual occurrence, presumably intended to show that they had, in some sense, missed their opportunity, which they could have taken any other time. Interestingly or, perhaps coincidentally, both these vignettes with Andrew associate him with Philip.

We lose sight of Andrew in later life: tradition has it that he was crucified in Patras, on the western coast of modern-day Greece while others have him in Ethiopia. There is also a myth that his bones were brought over to Scotland, which is how he became patron saint, but he is also Patron of Russia.