**WHEN THE SAINTS…**

26th of OCTOBER ALFRED the GREAT

For the rest of the week MARTIN LUTHER

1st of NOVEMBER ALL SAINTS

We Celebrate Luther on October 31st, which is the anniversary of his posting the 95 theses, but, frankly, he is such an important figure that there are three additional articles on aspects of his work and achievements, which you can take on a daily basis or give yourself a few days rest!

The entry for All Saints’ Day is a crib from Thomas Merton which should make us think.

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It seems a shame that all most of us know about ALFRED the GREAT is that he burnt some cakes while taking refuge in a peasant woman’s hovel during his ultimately successful campaign against the Danes.

There is an element of farse nowadays about the fashion for historians to describe the Vikings as ‘perhaps somewhat over-aggressive merchants.’ Elsewhere their murderous pillage of innocent civilians; the gang-rape of women; the enslavement of any survivors, and binges of gratuitous destruction and arson has been characterised as ‘no more than the behaviour of rather over-exuberant football hooligans, assuming it ever happened at all! This leaves Millwall supporters by comparison, donning saffron robes and chanting their mantras; congratulating the opposing team after a six-nil home defeat, and wishing its supporters ‘bon voyage.’

Moreover, A battalion of teachers emerging from the second world war had more than enough of their own experience with which to frighten the next generation without needing to dwell on stories about present allies who had suffered as much as they had themselves; but the threat from the Danes was serious, whereas the burning of the cakes is a folk-tale that diminishes the character and achievements of one of the finest rulers England ever had even if it allows him the common touch and the ability to own up to his mistakes; both qualities of which our present leaders are sorely in need.

Geoffrey Hindley, in his survey of Anglo-Saxon history, writes grimly:

‘It was the Wessex of Alfred the Great that prevented Anglo-Saxon Christian civilisation from being submerged by what we might call ‘Pagan cultural norms.’ The battle of Eddington in 878 was the decisive turning point for England, some would say, for Christian Europe. Others have argued that the survival of the English language itself could have been in jeopardy, but no serious historian would contest that had Wessex gone under, so would the kingdom of the English, or, as Alfred came to call it ‘The kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons.”

Alfred was the right man at the right time: having wrestled some years of peace and stability for his people, he set about doing what he could with the use of his many and varied gifts to establish and maintain that peace by every means at his disposal. This in itself would be enough to earn him the style ‘the Great;’ the only ruler England has ever had to justify that honorific, but to proceed further by setting him alongside some of the greatest spiritual leaders in the world requires further qualification.

So, to list some of his achievements in the secular sphere, not only did he exercise very great personal courage in battle when circumstances required, but he re-organised a conscript army so that only half of them were serving at any time, while the remainder were able to stay at home and work as they might. He was a consummate general, who treated his enemies with courtesy and generosity, not to mention bringing some to Christ and supervising their baptism. He also created the first working navy in England, and established coastal garrisons that enabled rapid sea communication, all of which considerably lessened the threats of sudden Viking raids.

He devised a law code which has been criticised for being unclear, which is, perhaps, a lawyerly observation from those seeking clarity in detail, when the reality is that principles of justice and mercy cannot always be expressed in minute detail, so that magistrates and those whose job it was to exercise justice were free to establish precedent, which has been an essential part of English Jurisprudence ever since.

Summing up Alfred’s achievements as king, Robert Atwell writes:

‘Born in the year 848[-9], Alfred was the king of the West Saxons who effectively brought to an end the constant threat of Danish domination in the British Isles. He came to the throne at the age of 22 and after establishing peace set about bringing stability to both church and state. He gave half of his income to founding religious houses which themselves acted as Christian centres for education, care of the sick and poor and respite for travellers. He was a daily attender at mass and himself translated many works into the vernacular. He evolved a legal code based on common sense and Christian mercy: his whole life was marked by the compassion of Christ. He died this day in the year 899.

In his own turn, Alfred writes, as a ‘preface’ to his translation of Gregory’s ’Pastoral Care:’

‘I would have it known what men of learning there were formerly throughout England; both in religious and secular orders; and how there were happy times then throughout England; and how the kings, who had authority over this people, obeyed God and his messengers; and how they not only maintained peace, morality and authority at home but also extended their territory outside; and how they succeeded both in warfare and in wisdom; and also how eager were the religious orders both in teaching and in learning as well as in all the holy services which it was their duty to perform for God; and how people from abroad sought wisdom and instruction in this country; and how nowadays, if we wished to acquire these things, we would have to seek them outside.

Learning has declined so thoroughly in England that there were very few on this side of the Humber who could understand their divine services in English, or even translate a single letter of Latin into English: and I suppose that there were not many beyond the Humber either. There were so few of them that I cannot recollect even a single one south of the Thames when I succeeded to the kingdom. Thanks be to God almighty that we now have any supply of teachers at all! Therefore I beseech you to do what I believe you are willing to do: as often as you can, free yourself from worldly affairs so that you may apply that wisdom that God gave you wherever you can. … We were Christians in name alone, and very few of us possessed Christian virtues.

When I reflected on all this, I recollected that – before everything was ransacked and burned – churches throughout England stood filled with treasures and books. Similarly, there was a great multitude of those serving God. And they derived very little benefit from those books, because they could understand nothing of them, since they were not written in their own language. It is as if they had said: ‘Our ancestors, who formerly maintained these places, loved wisdom, and through it they obtained wealth and passed it onto us. Here one can still see their track, but we cannot follow it.’ Therefore we have now lost wealth as well as the wisdom, because we did not wish to set our minds to the track.

Therefore it seems better to me that we too should turn into the language that we can all understand certain books which are the most necessary for all to know and accomplish this, as with God’s help we may very easily do provided we have peace enough, so that all the free-born young men now in England who have the means to apply themselves to it, may be set to learning [as long as they are not useful for some other employment] until the time that they can read English writings properly. Thereafter one may instruct in Latin those who one wishes to teach further and wishes to advance to both orders.’

That Alfred was looking back to the age of Bede, Alcuin, Willibrord and Boniface with Rose-tinted spectacles, and his observation that there was more learning ‘on the other side of the Humber’ than in his own province is fair comment, but the idea of retaining the vernacular generally, and teaching Latin to those willing and able to learn is well ahead of his time, emerging most clearly in Luther’s liturgical principles. Education! Education! Education! Not that you’d want to put Tony Blair alongside Alfred, but the policy is there, and by it King Alfred managed to establish English as a national literary language well before any such revolution took place elsewhere in Europe.

Bishop Asser, Alfred’s biographer, relates:

‘In 853 King Aethelwulf sent his son Alfred to Rome in state, accompanied by a great number of both nobles and commoners. At this time the Lord Pope Leo was ruling the Apostolic See; he anointed the child Alfred as King, ordaining him properly, received him as an adopted son and confirmed him.

He learned by heart the ‘daily round,’ that is the services of the hours, and then certain psalms and prayers; these he collected in a single book, which he kept by him day and night, as I have seen for myself; Amid all the affairs of the present life he took it around with him everywhere for the sake of prayer, and was inseparable from it. But alas, he could not satisfy his craving for what he desired the most, namely the liberal arts, for, as he used to say, there were no good scholars in the entire kingdom of the West Saxons at that time …

He similarly applied himself attentively to charity and distribution of alms to the native population and to foreign visitors of all races, showing immense and incomparable kindness and generosity to all, as well as to the investigation of things unknown. Wherefore many Franks, Frisians, Gauls, Vikings, Welshmen, Irishmen and Bretons subjected themselves willingly to his Lordship, nobles and commoners alike; and, as befitting his royal status, he ruled, loved, honoured and enriched them all with wealth and authority, just as he did his own people.’

If there is a touch of hyperbole present here the fundamental message is clear enough: Alfred was not only personally pious and generous, which were, in any case, the ideals of an Anglo-Saxon warrior king, but his ’education policy ‘and its achievements are historical facts. The wisdom and compassion in Atwell’s summing up of his life is evident: it is likely that he instigated the famous Anglo-Saxon Chronicles which, together with Bede and another few monastic writings, have given us practically all we can know about England before the conquest. This is a man who gave his life with its considerable God-given gifts to the service of God and his people.

It seems very likely that his childhood visit to Rome coloured the rest of his life: he sent his eldest there in his turn. His role models were Gregory the Great and Charles the Great, and his was the spirit of reconstruction and reform in the face of the damage and wounds of the Viking raids: He would have approved of Atlee putting into effect similar wide-reaching reforms and re-construction after the devastation of last war. Might we hope and pray for something equally far-sighted and divinely inspired after the present crisis has come to an end?

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MARTIN LUTHER [1483-1546] was born into a peasant family in Saxony, but his father Hans did rather well and got into copper smelting, and his mother Margaret came from a rather higher social circle; so their income and aspirations sufficed to get Martin a good education at the cathedral school in Magdeburg, in 1501 at the University at Erfurt, where he joined an order of Augustinian hermits there, and was ordained priest in 1507. He was appointed lecturer at the recently founded University of Wittenberg in 1511, sent by his order, and became a popular professor. In 1515 he was appointed Vicar of his order, having charge of some 12 monasteries in the vicinity. By 1517, in his mid-30’s, Luther was making his way in the world with some success; not the embittered failure with a chip on his shoulder that some authors have postulated.

There is a story that in 1505, while on a country walk, a storm broke and Luther was so frightened that he called for the assistance of St Anne, the apocryphal mother of Mary and patron saint of miners – the family business – ‘that if she helped him out he would become a monk. His father had intended Martin for the law. The fact that Luther feared going to his death unshriven is proof that he was, in every respect, a product of mediaeval Christianity and culture.

There is some uncertainty whether Luther did, in fact, nail his 95 theses to the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg: people who knew him told propagandists and biographers that he did. What is far more significant is that he sent a copy of them to the Archbishop of Mainz, who had a secret understanding with the Vatican that he would share what was likely to be a very large bonanza from the sale of indulgences, so that Luther’s perfectly unremarkable request for a debate on the subject was treated by this senior prelate as a threat to church order, which was certainly not Luther’s intention at the time.

His challenge was written in Latin rather than German, which effectively confined its transmission to clergy and academics, rather than to the man in the street; not to mention that the 95 theses, which can be read in their entirety in Henry Bettenson’s ‘Documents of the Christian Church’ were hardly likely to send anybody scuttling to the barricades. The door of the Castle church would have functioned as the bulletin board for the university, and to advertise such debates was an accepted practice in academic etiquette of the time and were the standard means for career advancement among students. To illustrate this point, Johannes Eck, the church’s representative deputed to oppose Luther, had himself once requested such a debate, on the far more serious topic of usury.

There is no hint in the 95 theses of schism with the church: Luther simply makes a few assertions such as:

* The pope, as head of the church, may certainly set or waive penalties for breeches of canon law, of which he is guardian, but his jurisdiction does not allow him to forgive actual sins.
* The Gospel [in its broadest sense of Good News] states that God’s mercy and grace forgives the sin and remits whatever penalty may have been due.
* It is not for Christians to spend their money on acts of personal piety when their first responsibility is to use their wealth to assist their families and to provide for the needy.
* The true ‘treasury of merit’ subsists in the Gospel.

Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz had borrowed squillions from the Fugger banks in order to purchase his office, and on accepting the job of heading up yet another campaign to sell indulgences in the German lands, made it a secret condition that he would retain enough of the proceeds to get him out of debt, so he passed Luther’s challenge straight to Rome, which resulted in a summons for Luther to appear there in order to explain himself, although the outcome was never in doubt.

It is not certain whether Frederick, the Elector of Saxony, [known as The Wise] ever converted to Protestantism, but he had recently founded the University at Wittenberg, which was just beginning to attract some of the best teachers, so he wasn’t going to allow Luther, his star professor, to go to Rome and run the risk that he may never have returned. Like many of the German princes, seeking greater independence for themselves from both the pope and the emperor, Luther and the reformation became a political as well as a cultural pawn by means of whom Frederick could reduce papal hegemony and influence on his territory. Besides this both Frederick and the pope were as one in doing their best to prevent the election of Charles V to succeed Maximilian as Holy Roman Emperor, so in 1518 the Pope sent Cardinal Cajetan as his envoy to wring a retraction from Luther, with instructions to arrest him if he wouldn’t recant, but Frederick had procured Luther a safe-conduct from the emperor, and it is from this time on that Luther abandoned the self-restraint that had characterised the tone of his 95 theses.

In October 1518, in Augsburg, Luther met Cardinal Cajetan, who simply expected Luther to recant.

Cajetan was a thoroughly reputable theologian who had received his cardinal’s hat in 1517 on account of his conspicuous loyalty to the church. In time he himself investigated the whole business of indulgences and came to conclusions not a million miles from those of Luther, but for him, as for the church, as B B Warfield has put it, Augustine’s doctrine of church order trumped Augustine’s doctrine of grace[!]

* Luther offered to give up his side of the controversy if his opponents would do the same, so as to neutralise the affair
* He asked Cajetan to show him his mistakes, whereupon Cajetan cited the ‘treasury of merits’ and the necessity of forgiveness to be mediated by the priesthood, to which Luther retorted that neither of these ideas were to be found in the Bible.
* Cajetan asserted that the authority of the church trumps that of scripture!

The next move from the church was to stage another meeting, in the summer of 1519, this time at Leipzig with theologian John Eck. At this point perhaps Luther still imagined that if he could convince the authorities by means of fair debate, he could effect some change in church policy, but He was mistaken: for the church the affair was an open and closed matter of obedience.

Famously the third and final meeting was at the Diet of Worms; not a slimming programme, but a full ceremonial meeting in the presence of the newly enthroned Emperor Charles V together with all the principal rulers in the empire. Charles V had only just been elected in 1519, with the aid of Frederick. He was barely out of his teens at this time, but, as a pious and serious-minded ruler with more responsibilities than he could be expected to carry, he had come to realise that Luther’s ideas had been gaining some purchase, and he saw his job as protecting and shoring up the church.

By April 1521, however, Luther had become an outlaw, since a Bull of Excommunication issued by Pope Leo had given him until 3rd of January 1521 to recant, which hadn’t happened. On the contrary, whereas Pope Leo had ordered Luther’s books to be burned, Luther publicly burned his copy of Leo’s Bull of Excommunication together with the works of his opponents in the main square at Wittenberg.

By the time of this crucial meeting, then, the dynamics had changed radically. When Luther burnt his Bull of Excommunication in Wittenberg he was cheered on by his students and the townsfolk as a popular hero. He had also hardened his attitudes, and during 1520 he wrote three major tracts, two of them in German. One of these was an appeal to the German nobility to throw off the bonds of the papacy in the German lands, and by the time he attended the Diet he had just completed a tour of ‘Germany.’

At this meeting two questions only were put to Luther after a stack of his writings were pointed out on a table in front of him:

1. Are these your writings?
2. Do you stand by or recant what is said in them?

Luther requested 24 hours in which to prepare his reply, which was, in essence:

‘There are three groups of writings on this table, all by me. The first are pious explanations of the Christian life: nobody – not even my opponents would disagree with anything I’ve said in there. I cannot recant them, because to recant them would be to recant pious explanations of the Christian life, and to do so would mean recanting Christianity itself.

The second set of books are attacks on abuses by the papacy: I cannot recant these because they are true.

The third set of books are attacks I’ve levied against my opponents: I’ve probably been too harsh, but I still can’t recant them either.’

The Imperial interrogator required a clear statement:

‘Unless I am convinced otherwise by evidence from scripture or incontestable arguments, I remain bound by the scripture I have put forward. As long as my conscience remains captive to the word of God I neither can, nor will recant. Since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen.’

In a book written after Luther’s death, George Rohrer, one of Luther’s propagandists, added the words: ‘Here I stand; I can do no other,’ which sums up what he said, but it’s likely he didn’t utter that famous quote.

The inevitable outcome now was that Luther would be condemned to death as an imperial outlaw, as well as a heretic in the eyes of the papacy, so that on his way back to Wittenberg he was ‘kidnapped’ by arrangement with Fredrick’s agents, and kept in his castle under the name of Junker George, ‘Junker’ being the German equivalent in social standing to a knight. He disguised himself by growing a beard, and during this stay, among other writings, he made his translation of the New Testament.

There is a sense in which the church’s completely authoritarian reaction to Luther’s 95 theses forced him into outlawry both in the church and the empire. Luther had, effectively, stepped into space; into territory inhabited only by heretics such as Ian Huss, who had paid for his opinions with his life. When asked, Luther affirmed his support for Huss, whose martyrdom at the Council of Constance in 1415 had brought about a church within a church in Bohemia as a reaction. Other than this, Luther was now leading a revolt the goals for which he couldn’t have possibly known. Unfortunately what emerged with increasing clarity was his own inability to handle opposition with the same grace that he had demonstrated in his responses to Papal authority.

Nowadays group psychology understands the dynamic by which revolutions such as this one tend to splinter into fragments, and Luther cannot, in justice, be held responsible for a process for which he was ultimately not to blame. But the inevitable opposition within his original support group came both from those who felt that a break with the church had been the result of Luther’s poor methods and conduct – these focussing principally on Erasmus, and those who, inevitably, felt that Luther had compromised and not gone far enough; these headed up mainly be Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich.

 Two issues served to bring out the worst in Luther: his attitude to the Anabaptists, lead by a former student of his, Thomas Muntzer, and the fury and hatred he spouted against the Jews in 1542, when, after a pamphlet in 1523 warmly inviting them to convert now that he had shown them the true face of Christianity had failed to evince a positive response.

Muntzer had clearly gone off his head by the time he led what should be termed ‘the farmers’ war’ in 1525, but Calvin, in Geneva, experienced a similar need to distance himself from the anabaptists, and already a double outlaw, Luther had to be very careful to place an ocean of ‘clear blue water’ between them, and wrote in the most violent terms encouraging the authorities to kill as many of the rebels as possible.

Despite government support for a reconciliation at a meeting between Luther and Zwingli at Augsburg in 1529, the two men were unable to agree, and afterwards Luther stated that Christians should rather be baptised in the Roman church than Zwingli’s. Luther was also several years behind Zwingli in getting married, which he did in 1525, to a runaway nun, with whom he had several children.

One aspect of Luther’s legacy that cannot possibly be overlooked is music. As a more than competent musician himself, Luther had a good ear for the best composers of his time; Josquin, Isaac and lesser figures who were able to set the strong chorale melodies Luther either composed, or adapted serendipitously from German folk songs or popular plainchant, so that the tunes became instantly recognisable by congregations. An entire dynasty of north German composers, all the way down to J s Bach built many of their major works around these chorales and it is not an exaggeration to state that the whole of western music would have been much the poorer without his legacy. Catholic opponents claimed that Luther’s music was carrying their congregations away faster than any innovations in his theology or liturgy, although it is also probably the case that what assisted him most was that he had caught the spirit of the times in Germany, and that he may have been, arguably, riding on the crest of a socio-political wave generated and fostered by the German ruling class without whose backing he would almost certainly have finished life as a heap of ashes, instead of dying comfortably, surrounded by friends and family in 1546.

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There are separate articles this week on some aspects of Luther’s doctrinal positions, but very fat doorstep books have been flung into the world on the subject of the reformation, and for those interested in theological rather than historical developments ‘Reformation thought’ by Alister McGrath is probably the most reliable. For people wishing to understand Luther’s own theological development during the early years of C16, McGrath also meets that need with his ‘Luther’s Theology of the Cross,’ but only for those with an extraordinarily strong will to live!

**MARTIN LUTHER**

**BACKGROUND –** WHAT WAS THE PROBLEM WITH INDULGENCES?

1. Humans commit sins
2. They become aware of this and seek God’s forgiveness
3. God loves and forgives them, but
4. Reparations are due, not because God withdraws his forgiveness, but because they are simply due to clear up the damage effected by the sin which may be, for example, analogous to a parent, who, whilst loving their child, imposes a just penance for something that child has done, for all that the child is truly sorry and the parents are acting in justice as they see it.
5. There are going to be plenty of sins that haven’t even been confessed to add to the pile that have been, and if we haven’t evened the score by the time we die, the church hit upon the doctrine of purgatory, whereby the hope of heaven is still real enough, but nevertheless nasty punishments have to be undergone before we get there.

Indulgences have been described as ‘spiritual capital’ that will pay the cost of temporal satisfaction not utterly dissimilar to Buddhist notions of merit. By endowing a church or monastery or perform an action that will otherwise benefit the church; or, for instance, give to the poor, such an act helps settle the score. The indulgence machine got cranked up when the Pope proclaimed the first crusade and declared that to join it was such an outstandingly good deed that your whole page in the black book would get torn out! If, for any reason, you were unable to actually travel, a generous freewill offering of cash or some other support for the endeavour would effect, rather than ‘purchase’, a reprieve proportionately timed to the extent of your ‘generosity.’

In 1343, however, Pope Clement VI tarted up the theology into a system, explained in the Bull ‘Unigenitus …’ ‘The reason Christ died was to make satisfaction for all human sin then and ever since etc. One drop of his precious blood, however, would have sufficed to remit all the sins ever committed up to the time of the crucifixion, now and for all time to come. But Clement insisted that, far in excess of one drop of blood, Christ had poured out ‘an unmeasured flood’ of it, for the use of his church, and peter, having the keys that get handed down by his successors to the present Pope, bestows on him the sole access to this ‘Treasury of merit,’ which he, as its steward, is authorised to distribute among the faithful.

Up until 1476 the faithful were encouraged to make this transaction on their own behalf, but then Sixtus IV offered the chance to effect it post hoc for dead relatives and friends, which opened up another entire vista of opportunities for abuse. Between 1486 and 1503 three different sales campaigns were run in the German lands for these indulgences, which raised a total of some half a million Goldgulden.

In 1516 ten years after Pope Julius II launched yet another campaign, it was moved into the German lands with the agency of Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz, who needed cash to repay the Fugger bank for the loan he had taken out in order to purchase his office! As the acting executive, as it were, the 95 theses would have gone to Albrecht.

The problem now was market saturation: after three previous campaigns close together everyone who wanted an indulgence presumably already had one, so, as an early instance of snake-oil salesmanship, the 1516 model was marketed as a ‘plenary’ indulgence: whereas most indulgences after the 1092 crusader one, were time-limited: the more you pay the longer the reprieve. So the plenary indulgence got the soul straight out of purgatory: ‘As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.’ This slogan, and other aspects of marketing were down to an extrovert Dominican theologian named Johan Tetzel, appointed by the Archbishop. He it was who devised and distributed homilies for priests to read out to their congregations:

“‘Do you not hear the voices of deceased parents and other loved-ones crying loudly: We gave you birth, we fed you, we raised you, we left you our earthly possessions, and yet you are cruel and hard to us: you are able to free us easily by purchasing indulgences for us, but you let us lie in flames and delay the glory promised us.”’

Probably the most offensive sales pitch in the whole of church history is corroborated in several places, in which Tetzel claimed that this indulgence was so efficacious that it would free somebody even if they had violated the Virgin Mary herself!!!

By this time the legal fiction of a freewill offering had gone to the four winds.

The original intention of indulgences may not have been altogether evil in spirit: they offered hope of salvation in the face of what was conceived to be a harsh judge, justly angered at human wrong-doing, and the ability to ‘purchase’ such reprieves gave access to people without the means to make foundations or do something dramatic, but by this time many leading figures within the church were rightly scandalised, and Luther was by no means the only person to choke on this: Erasmus himself objected, as did the University of Paris, which was still the principal teaching institution of mediaeval Catholicism, and Elector Frederick of Saxony wouldn’t even let the agents into his territory.

It is conceivable that, had Archbishop Albrecht been able to deal with Luther from a position of moral authority, things might have worked out differently, but by the time the 95 theses got to Rome, the curia probably had no alternative to making the dispute an issue of church order, and cultural clash between German-speakers and Italians may have played their part. At all events, the issue became caught up in politics once the elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, chose to throw his weight behind his newly founded university and its star professor, whom he appears hardly to have known personally. There was long-standing enmity between Frederick’s family, the Vettins, and that of Albrecht, the Hohenzollerns. ,

**BACKGROUND –** JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE AND FAITH ALONE

This is not only the crux of Luther’s theological breakthrough, but an important statement in Christian spirituality; however we may view it as a church and as individuals.

The expression ‘Catholic guilt’ is still in current usage and exists in the hearts and spirits of many Christians of all denominations. The Franciscan writer and retreat-leader Richard Rohr states that Protestants had the chance to relieve Christians of what Henri Nouwen terms ‘The habit of self-loathing,’ but ‘they blew it.’

What was a true theological and spiritual breakthrough by Luther in the context of late mediaeval Christianity is just what modern Christians need to understand and accept as being the full measure of God’s lovingkindness and mercy: Desmond Tutu puts the whole thing in a nut-shell that Luther would have rejoiced at: ‘God has very high standards, but very low expectations.’

If Luther had a personality problem at all it may have been that of perfectionism, which can be very destructive, but that isn’t to say that he necessarily suffered it as a neurosis. He became such an exemplary monk that he was handed the responsibility of leadership, but he recounts that he could have martyred himself by means of excessive austerities, despite which he could not prevent himself feeling that whatever he managed to attain in this way would still be insufficient for his salvation, and he admits that he came to hate a God whose standard of righteousness made it virtually impossible for any human to live up to his exacting precepts.

Mediaeval Catholic theology usually viewed God as a remote and demanding patriarch, and dealt with the problem by means of the doctrines of penance and purgatory: part of the devotion to Mary embodied the hopes and prayers that the mother of God would intercede compassionately for each of us. Veneration of the saints to some extent avoided having to ask God directly for help in whatever situation.

Augustine writes of two kinds of love; love of something or someone for their own sake, as simply being loveable, which he saw as pure love; and a rather more egocentric love; of something because of what it could do for us. We may love our good works for the satisfaction they give us, but that satisfaction is itself an element of selfishness, rather than something we achieve purely for the love of God. This is an impossible standard to live up to, and what Luther is telling us is that God does not actually require that of us.

What this meant to Luther was that, while it is entirely possible to go through life in what Francis de Sales terms ‘Ordinary goodness’ – without stealing, murdering or lying, for example, the Gospels are so strict when it comes to the utmost purity of our motives – living, for example, without anger or lust – that, for all practical purposes it is impossible for a human to live up to such purity of heart.

Luther never doubted the need for all kinds of good works, but he knew that these, too, would be insufficient before the judgement seat. The problem he focussed on had been set by Augustine, in that however virtuously we may live, good works alone will not get us through the pearly gates, because such works will always involve, at best, the merest smidgeon of self-regard or self-satisfaction.

By reading Romans ch1 vv16-17, Luther at last received his ‘Eureka’ moment, once he realised that God, through Christ, offers a free gift of grace to anyone and everyone who will receive and make use of it by faith so that the whole edifice of penance, purgatory and especially indulgences, disappears. When God looks at each of us what he sees is the righteousness of his son. This gift is what we mean by ‘the grace of God.’ Luther goes on to assert that with the aid of this grace God intends to free us to do his will without having to deal with what can so often become a crippling burden of free-floating self-conscious guilt and shame.

It should be clear though, that Luther is not a libertarian: in ch3 of his treatise to Pope Leo ‘On Christian liberty’ he writes:

‘It is not from works that we are set free by the faith of Christ, but from the belief in works; that is from foolishly presuming to seek justification through works.’

 In that his doctrine in no way releases Christians to behave or even think selfishly; neither does he advocate what some preachers term ‘cheap grace.’ He hopes – perhaps somewhat naively – that once humans become thoroughly aware of this wonderful release from guilt, we shall all feel motivated to return that love as best we may by living for God and for others.

The downside of all this, however, is predestination, though which Luther deals with in his polemic with Erasmus, who affirms our freedom of choice.

Nowadays Catholic theologians and spiritual leaders such as Richard Rohr and Thomas Keating have put forward notions of original sin that improve and clarify the standard one, which derives from Augustine, but which is, nevertheless, valuable. We can now see the nature of Original Sin as being traceable back to aspects of genetic inheritance, aspects of upbringing, both parental and more widely cultural, together with our infantile reactions to them which tend to discolour the blank sheet that Thomas Traherne writes about so movingly. Ultimately, though, as Louis MacNeice writes: ‘there is no road that is right entirely.’

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**BACKGROUND –** SOLA SCRIPTURA

This is another important pillar of Luther’s teaching that affects the way most Christians understand the faith, so, once more, it’s worth examining not merely as a historical matter, although there were certain conditions in the mediaeval church that we wouldn’t necessarily be aware of otherwise.

Firstly, it is not true that mediaeval Catholics didn’t read or know the Bible: many educated people possessed one, or, more likely, parts of one because before printing was invented, manuscripts were rather rare and very expensive.

When we looked at William Tyndale it became plain that, certainly from mid C15 there was an increasing number of bibles in vernacular languages including Wycliffe’s English translations.

Most mediaeval Christians encountered the Bible through sermons, mystery plays or the visual arts to be found in churches. From the time of Charlemagne, around the turn of the ninth century, a sort of ‘official bible’ came into being, known as the ‘Glossa Ordinaria;’ with interpretations on the margins presented in accordance with the church’s reception of classic theologians which became one of the two TRADITIONS. What they would hardly ever have encountered was a ‘naked’ Bible, without commentary, simply because the church was wary about letting layfolk loose on the text in case they might be led astray, but whilst lecturing to his students on the psalms, Luther prepared and printed copies with blank spaces in the margins so that they could take notes: his is a step forward.

There is a theological term ‘exegetical optimism,’ which denotes the pious hope that any hundred people reading the same passage would, by the agency of the Holy Spirit, come to precisely similar understanding of it. Eventually even Luther had to issue various catechisms and guidelines in order to restrain the unwary reader from getting bogged down in contradictions and ambiguities.

But there was another TRADITION in the mediaeval church: quite apart from what its leaders derived from scripture, whether right or wrong, it was understood that doctrines with no discernible biblical derivation whatever were nevertheless to be held as being of equal and complementary truth with it. Luther’s opponent at Leipzig in 1519, Johan Eck, went even further into territory that was by no means supported universally even at the time. He asserted that the church’s authority is superior to that of scripture: the Holy Spirit was bestowed on the church; the church is older; the church made up the canon of scripture, and the decisions of the pope trump anything found in the bible. Such an assertion would have been quite irreconcilable with Luther’s position, although renaissance scholars, some of whom already knew Hebrew, were beginning to learn Greek, and would attack this ‘tradition’ from a different angle.

Another important aspect of ‘Sola Scriptura’ is that whilst understanding the bible as the ultimate authority for the church’s teaching, Luther was by no means a biblical literalist. His notion of ‘the Gospel covered the literal message of ‘Good news’ found in the whole bible, rather than in any one of the four Gospels, but he would, if he could, have excluded the Epistle of James, because it seemed to contradict his doctrine of Justification by grace and faith alone, by placing undue emphasis on the importance of works in order to achieve personal salvation; neither was he too keen on Revelations.

At the beginning of Luther’s battles he had enjoyed the support of Erasmus, the leading light in what is termed ‘the new learning,’ with its emphasis on rediscovering ancient texts and evaluating them from scratch, without the glosses. Erasmus, however, was an irenic character who felt that bringing about a schism in the church over a comparatively unimportant matter like indulgences was overkill, and, in the spirit of previous reformations, he had taken the view that matters could have been better handled by Luther. He was approached to write an attack on Luther, to which the latter responded with his famous document ‘On the Bondage of the Will,’ with a perfectly respectful preface acknowledging his opponent’s superior gifts. Erasmus responded with two more books by which time Luther had completely lost patience, and in a very long letter to Nicholas Warndorf he writes of Erasmus in a style that would have done credit to Donald Trump.

With ‘Sola Scriptura’ comes the need for honest and clear commentary and criticism, and it is perhaps to Erasmus that liberal Christians owe the tradition of scholarly evaluation of biblical texts from source, whereas it is arguable that Luther’s fierce opposition to Erasmus, despite his own wish to redact the Bible to suit his own theology, left his achievements to be shot at by others, bearing in mind, of course, that the whole modern movement for Bible scholarship arose from within the tradition Luther had launched.

What is undeniable, however, is that Luther’s extraordinary gifts of expression in German, both in his bible translation and in the hymns he published in 1525, lend the language a simplicity and directness that has enriched it ever since.

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**ALL SAINTS**

This is an edited quotation from Thomas Merton’s ‘New Seeds of Contemplation.’

EVERYTHING THAT IS IS HOLY

Detachment from things does not mean setting up a contradiction between things and God, as if God were another thing and as if things were his rivals. We do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but, rather we become detached from ourselves in order to see and use all things in and for God.

This is an entirely new perspective which many sincerely moral and ascetic minds fail utterly to see. There is no evil in anything created by God, nor can anything of his become an obstacle to our union with him. The obstacle is in ourself; that is to say in our need to maintain our separate external egotistic will. It is when we refer all things to this outward and false self that we alienate ourselves from reality and from God. It is then the false self that is our God and we love everything for the sake of this self. We use all things, so to speak, for the worship of this idol which is our imaginary self. In so doing we pervert and corrupt things … We do not thereby make them evil but we use them to increase our attachment to our illusory self.

Those who try to escape from this situation by treating the good things of God as if they were evils are only confirming themselves in a terrible illusion. ‘Woman is tempting me …wine is tempting me … food is tempting me …woman is pernicious … wine is poison …food is death … I must hate and revile them: by hating them I will please God.’ These are the thoughts and attitudes of a baby; of a savage, and of an idolator who seeks by magic incantations and spells to protect his egocentric self and placate the insatiable little god in his own heart. To take such an idol for god is the worst kind of self-deception: it turns a man into a fanatic, no longer capable of sustained contact with the truth; no longer capable of genuine love. In trying to believe in their ego as something holy these fanatics look upon everything else as unholy.

It is not true that the saints and the great contemplatives never loved created things and had no understanding or appreciation of the world, with its sight and sounds, and people living in it. They loved everything and everyone. Do you think their love of God was compatible with the hatred of things that reflected him and spoke of him on every side? You will say that they were supposed to be absorbed in God, and they had no eyes to see anything but him. Do you think they walked around like faces of stone and did not listen to the voices of men speaking to them, or understand the joys and sorrows of those around them? It was because the saints were absorbed in God that they were truly capable of seeing and appreciating created things, and it was because they loved him alone that they alone loved everybody.

Some people think that a saint cannot take a natural interest in anything created, they imagine that any form of spontaneity or enjoyment is a sinful gratification of fallen nature; that to be supernatural is to be obstructing all spontaneity, with cliches and arbitrary references to God. The purpose of these cliches, so to speak, is to hold everything at arms’ length; to frustrate spontaneous reactions; to exorcise feelings of guilt or perhaps to cultivate such feelings. One wonders sometimes if such morality is not, after all, a love of guilt. They suppose that the life of a saint cannot be anything but a perpetual duel with guilt, and that a saint cannot even drink a glass of cool water without making an act of contrition for slaking his thirst, as if that were a mortal sin; as for the saint every response to beauty, to goodness to the pleasant, were an offence; as if the saint could never allow himself to be pleased with anything but his prayers and his interior acts of piety.

A saint is capable of loving created things and enjoying the use of them; in dealing with them in a perfectly simple, natural manner, making no formal references to God, to his own piety and acting without any artificial rigidity at all. His gentleness and his sweetness are not pressed through his pores by the crushing restraint of a spiritual straight jacket. They come from his direct docility to the light of truth and to the will of God. Hence a saint is capable of talking about the world without any explicit reference to God in such a way that his statement gives greater glory to God and arouses a greater love of God than the observations of someone less holy who has to strain himself to make an arbitrary connection between creatures and God through the medium of hackneyed analogies and metaphors that are so feeble that they make you think that there is something the matter with religion. The saint knows that the world and everything made by God is good …

Merton knew what he was talking about, and would undoubtedly have encountered the kind of individual he’s panning.

For the past six months we’ve been reviewing the lives and achievements of people whom the church – the Anglican church, at least, regards not necessarily as saints, but as very special individuals who loved God, and who loved at least a section of their fellow human beings.

Merton is clear that the classic rejection of ‘the world’ is no road to sanctity, and yet we’ve been reviewing the lives of many monastics, contemplatives and ascetics who believed and acted to the contrary.

There has been a revolution over the past century in what and who we take to be holy. Acts of the Apostles refers to all believers as ‘saints,’ There are , or certainly were, spiritual directors around who might tell you that God wishes you to be a saint: what might that mean to you?

Is there, or has there been, anyone in your life whom you feel to be, or to have been, a saint?

Do we pray with Augustine; ‘Lord make me a saint, but not yet?’

If you were to become a saint yourself, how might you have changed?