WHEN THE SAINTS…

27th of JULY BROOKE FOSS WESTCOTT

29TH of JULY MARTHA, MARY & LAZARUS

30TH of JULY WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

31ST of JULY IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA

BROOKE FOSS WESTCOTT was born of a moderately wealthy family in Birmingham in 1825, and attended King Edward VI School, where he came under the influence of Headmaster, James Prince Lee, who became the first Bishop of Manchester. He was ordained from Cambridge in 1851, and took up a post as Master at Harrow School.

Whilst at Harrow he published a series of scholarly works on the Bible, resulting in his election as Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge in 1870; and together with less conservative pupils, Hart, Lightfoot and Benson, built up a tradition of Biblical Studies and Theology.

He also became significant in the development of Anglican social thought, and was keen to gather the latest scientific and intellectual discoveries to the cause of his theology; John Atherton remarks that: His leadership of the Holy Party was complemented by his commitment to the Christian Social Union, of which he was the first president.

He was significant in the foundation of the Clergy Training School in Cambridge, which was later renamed Westcott House in his honour.

In 1890 he was consecrated Bishop of Durham, a worthy antecedent of Bishop David Jenkins, whose appointment to Durham in the 80’s somewhat woke up the church with his liberal theology and social concerns. He successfully mediated in the miners’ strike of 1892 – something else he had in common with Bishop David!

Westcott died in 1901.

Here is a passage from his book ‘Christus consumatur’ which should encourage and comfort all of us at this time:

‘If the outward were the measure of the Church of Christ, we might despair. But side by side with us, when we fondly think, like Elijah or Elijah’s servant, that we stand alone, are countless multitudes whom we know not, angels whom we have no power to discern, children of God whom we have not learned to recognise. We have come to the Kingdom of God, peopled with armies of angels, and men working with us because they are working for Him though we cannot grasp the fullness of the truth and free ourselves from the fetters of sense. Yet we can, In the light of the incarnation, feel the fact of this unseen following: we can feel that heaven has been re-opened to us by Christ; that the hosts who were separated from Israel at Sinai by the fire and the darkness are now joined with us under our Saviour King, ascending and descending upon the son of man; that no external tests are final in spiritual things, that while we are separated one from another by barriers which we dare not overpass, by differences of opinion that we dare not conceal or extenuate, there still may be a deeper-lying bond in righteousness, of joy in the Holy Ghost, the apostolic notes of the Kingdom of God, that nothing which is of Earth can forever overpower.

Such convictions are sufficient to bring calm to the believer in the sad conflicts of a restless age, widely different from the blind complacency which is able to forget the larger sorrows of the world in the confidence of selfish security, and from the superficial indifference which regards diversities as trivial which for good or evil modify the temporal workings of faith. They enable us to preserve a true balance between the elements of our life. They teach us to maintain the grave, if limited, issues of the forms in which men perceive the truth, and to vindicate for the Spirit perfect freedom and absolute sovereignty. They guard us from that deceitful impatience which is eager to anticipate the last results of the discipline of the world and gain outward unity by compromise, which is hasty to abandon traces of our inheritance because we have forgotten or misunderstood their use. They inspire us with the ennobling hope that in the wisdom of God we shall become one, not by narrowing or defining the faith that is committed to us, but by rising through the help of the Spirit, to a worthier sense of its immeasurable grandeur.’

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MARTHA and MARY have entered Christian thought as ikons of the active and contemplative life respectively, and Jesus’ affirmation of Mary has traditionally been taken to signify Jesus’ advocacy of the contemplative over the active life for his followers. Actually this is a gross over-simplification, and a fairer evaluation of the two spiritual paths is traditionally taught by contrasting the lives of Paul and John the disciple.

The Martha-Mary story in Luke would seem, then, to start from an assumption that women’s work as ‘home-makers’ is of less intrinsic value than contemplation: what nonsense! A glance at Maslow’s pyramid demonstrates the priority of maintaining the necessities of life before the ‘higher’ faculties are able to operate: doesn’t the angel who attends Elijah at his lowest ebb take care to feed and rest him before giving instructions?

Another take on the Lukan story is that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and needs to speak seriously to both sisters, and is telling Martha: ‘Please don’t go to too much trouble.’ This is something we say to our hosts nowadays, but the reverse side of this is that, as Elizabeth David warns: ‘To offer a soufflé to a guest is to flatter; an omelette is for everyday guests, but a boiled egg is an insult.’ In the Middle East, even today, a guest’s level of importance or esteem is measured very much by what is served at table, and the same is true here, though to a lesser degree.

As an aside, in ancient times and in the middle ages, food at feasts and banquets was served according to precedence at table, so that the most important guests got the best food, whilst the further the lesser guests were placed from the host, the humbler would have been their fare; and the public, for whom a space at the very bottom of the table would often have been assigned, might simply receive a dole.

We get a useful take from Luke ch7 on the normal duties of a host, but Jesus would probably have thought of the food served as secondary to good conversation, and this is probably what Luke intends us to glean from his story: ‘We haven’t got time for this, Martha: I need you here with me.’

What’s interesting is why Christians stay with the short vignette from Luke about the sisters without going on to look at how John amplifies their relationship and their importance in his account of the raising from the dead of their brother Lazarus in chapters 11 and 12.

Both Luke and John place their stories in Bethany, when Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, so it’s possible that the meal in question was the dinner Martha gave for Jesus and Lazarus after the latter had been raised from the dead; and if so the family were going to pull out all the stops and Martha would have had her hands full. In fact, though, it seems more likely that the Lukan episode refers to another occasion, but if it doesn’t, it would be easy to understand Martha’s impatience with her sister.

Certainly what emerges from the episode in Luke is that Martha is the bossy one, and maybe there’s a hint here of Jesus affirming Mary’s right to be herself and follow her own lights. A careful reading of John might suggest that Mary seems a little more fragile than her sister. At the news of Jesus’ arrival at Bethany, Martha rushes out to meet him: nobody in the house seems unduly worried, but when Martha returns to tell Mary that Jesus is asking for her, Mary gets up to go, and the neighbours are concerned, and follow her.

On meeting Jesus, Martha and Mary say the same thing: ‘If you’d been with us our brother would be alive still.’ Martha continues: ‘But even now I know that God will give you what you ask …’ Mary simply falls at Jesus’ feet. Martha’s dialogue with Jesus results in her proclamation that: ‘I believe you are the Messiah; the one who is to come …’ Mary anoints Jesus as Messiah, ‘the anointed one,’ so that, in effect, they have each affirmed Jesus in their own individual ways. It’s typical of the ‘male-dominated’ tradition that Peter is remembered for affirming Jesus as Messiah, rather than Martha or Mary.

What is absolutely crucial is the emphasis John places on the love Jesus felt for the family: these are described, uniquely, as friends, rather than disciples, so that, going back to the episode in Luke, Jesus rather portentous rebuke to Martha needs to be read in this context.

In this light, perhaps a safer way of reading the dynamic between the sisters is that Martha is more impulsive than Mary: each of them would love Jesus in their own way, and he accepts both equally, but understands that their emotional and spiritual needs are different, but the ‘one size fits all’ fallacy probably needs to be faced down with greater emphasis for women than for men, and it’s Luke, of all the evangelists, who exerts himself to emphasise the women’s interest.

We’ve already looked at the supposed opposition between John the contemplative Christian, and Paul the active one, and that doesn’t add up either. The evangelist recounts that the disciple was known to the high priest, which is why he was able to get Peter admitted to the house: it’s likely, then, that he was the entrepreneur of Zebedee’s fishing outfit, apart from his brother James and himself being nicknamed by Jesus ‘Sons of thunder..’ Paul, the active one, on the other hand, describes his vision of the ‘Third Heaven,’ so he clearly travelled the mystical path too.

Most spiritual writers who advocate the contemplative life agree that it is of little use to the individual, to God and to the world if it doesn’t result in some benefit for others: similarly the active Christian will always need to factor in plenty of time for prayer, and St Francis de Sales suggests to his directee that if she’s particularly busy one day she should double her usual half-hour of devotion: there’s a good deal of sense in that: think about it. At all events, the prayer of General Astley before the battle of Edgehill is not one the active Christian should make a habit of:

‘Dear Lord though knowest how busy I must be this day: if I forget thee, do not thou forget me, for Christ’s sake.’

God has expressed himself creatively in each and every one of us, and we are free to serve and pursue God in love, as we come to understand him/her/it in the best way we know how

The church, by its very nature, exists to gather, nurture and support the people of God, but the best it can offer the individual pilgrim is to encourage and support each of us through public proclamations and rituals: merely turning up for church on Sundays is a bit like the little boy who, when given the price of admission to the circus, encountered the circus parade in the street and mistaking this for the circus itself, threw his money to one of the clowns: tragically, he had missed the main event.

The saying goes: ‘Pray as you can, not as you ought, but DO PRAY;’ and perhaps this is even more the case for those of us wishing to pursue a working relationship with God.

If we’re not very careful we can allow ourselves to be misled into thinking that one good thing is better than another – the other. The danger, then, is that we may try to force growth through one chosen channel without realising the equal value of another; a mind-set that can lead to spiritual pride and a sense of superiority.

You may have noticed, by the way, that, whilst we celebrate Lazarus today, John tells us nothing whatever about him.

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We dealt with WILLIAM WILBERFORCE when we looked at the CLAPHAM sect, and THE VENNS. But the very best way to get to know him more closely is to read William Hague’s excellent biography.

The C of E in C18 has been rather unkindly characterised as ‘The Conservative Party at prayer,’ but Wilberforce and others have always been able to challenge the assumption that the Conservatives are ‘the nasty party.’ Wilberforce converted early in life, and his friends convinced him that he could serve God as effectively in parliament as getting ordained.

Like others of the Clapham Sect, it wasn’t only that they were on the side of the angels at a time when empire and industry seemed to be moving forward regardless of the cost in human life and well-being, but the mental and physical cost in many of their individual campaigns was very great. The speech from which the following is extracted was made in 1789, and it took another 18 years before slavery was made illegal in the British Empire in 1807, and a further 26 before its abolition world-wide in 1833, just before Wilberforce’s death.

‘I mean not to accuse anyone, but to take the shame upon myself, in common, indeed, with the whole parliament of Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade of slavery to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty – we ought to all plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others.

+ [In the facts that I have laid before you,] I trust that I have proved that, upon every ground, total abolition ought to take place. I have urged many things which are not my own leading motives for proposing it, since I have wished to show that every description of gentlemen, and particularly the West Indian planters, who deserve every attention, that the abolition is politic upon their own principles. Policy, however, sir, is not my principle; and I am not ashamed to say it. There is a principle above everything that is politic, and when I reflect on the command which says: ‘thou shalt do no murder,’ believing its authority to be divine, how can I dare to set up any reasonings of my own against it?

Sir the nature and all the circumstances of this trade are now laid open to us. We can no longer plead ignorance. We cannot evade it. We may spurn it. We may kick it out of the way. But we cannot turn aside so as to avoid seeing it. For it is brought now so directly before our eyes that this house must decide, and must justify to all the world as to its own conscience, the rectitude of all the grounds of its decision.

Let not Parliament be the only body that is insensible to the principles of natural justice. Let us make reparation to Africa, as far as we can, by establishing trade upon a true commercial principle, and we shall soon find the rectitude of our own conduct rewarded by the benefits of a regular and growing commerce.

And Africa’s still waiting!!!

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ST IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA is a name that usually gets a mention in general histories, if they deal with the ‘Counter-reformation,’ as the founder of the Jesuit Order.

The outline of his life is pretty well known, and we have Fr Luis Gonzalez to thank for having written down Ignatius’ memoirs, and compiling from them a coherent autobiography, although the coherence comes from the reflection and diligence with which Ignatius had come to understand his own faith journey.

Born to a noble family in 1491, at age 15 he was sent to court as a page to King Ferdinand; and then as a soldier under the Duke of Navarre.

In 1520: Francis I, the French king, had made headway into Spain as far as Pamplona, and as Captain of infantry Ignatius resolved not to surrender the city, though the rest of his men wished to do so. During the siege Ignatius was hit by a cannonball that shattered one of his legs and severely wounded the other. The French rather admired his bravery, and took him into hospital to be given the best medical attention.

While in hospital he asked for something to read, and the only available material was lives of the saints. The usual potted biographies skip onto his decision to give his life to God and go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but the details in between are far more interesting because, in effect, he simply brought the persona and self-will of the soldier and courtier to Christ, so that the real meaning of his subsequent story becomes the account of an absolutely remarkable spiritual pilgrimage.

At the outset of this journey his motives really were vain: he’d merely converted his old personality into a new direction, but he always seems to have had competent confessors, from whom he took advice as though they were military orders: for a while he experimented with the ascetic life, which did little for him, other than rid him of the vanity with which he’d taken care of his appearance previously. In time, though, once he had dealt with his vanity, he was able to begin to take care of himself in a more ‘sensible’ way. Eventually he became so sensitive about his vainglory that he wouldn’t even disclose his name or where he had been born: being from a noble family.

He gave his costly clothes to a beggar, but learned, to his chagrin, that the recipient had been harshly treated because of them.

At this stage in his spiritual journey he made the best effort he could at a full- life confession but began to suffer scruples which he realised were not helping him, and even after his confessor ordered him not to confess anything other than what arose during his daily round, this didn’t help either, and he became so distressed that he thought of taking his own life.

For such an active man it may come as a surprise that Ignatius experienced visions throughout the rest of his spiritual journey, some of which gave him very great courage and consolation, whilst others seem to have been of an adverse nature: he always seems to have accepted guidance from his confessors as to which was which, but he usually managed to find his own way before having his intuitions confirmed, and from this area of his life he learned what he calls, in his spiritual exercises, ‘the discernment of spirits.’

Effectively what Ignatius experienced was an extraordinary internal battle before God could begin to fashion him into the instrument he became: ‘Sculptor God strike!’ seems not to have been his prayer; rather ‘Here I am; send me …’ but unlike Isaiah, he didn’t seem particularly willing to wait for instructions unless they came from a human authority he could put his faith in; in other words, a superior officer!

What resulted, however, from some incredibly painful internal conflicts, was somebody uniquely able to pour these experiences into his programme for helping others through similar adversity, because he seems to have been able to internalise and transform his experiences every step of the way.

His training as a soldier seems to have stayed with him all his life inasmuch that he always seems to have obeyed not only his confessors, but his soldier’s training enabled him to deal, acknowledge and respect other legitimately appointed authorities, whether teachers, local administrators, inquisitors or secular judges.

Although he was quite particular about whom he chose to trust in the field of spiritual direction, and had a very definite idea of how he wished his spiritual life to progress, this alone might not necessarily have worked out, but, for whatever psychological reason, God seems often to have used his openness to the experience of visions to fill him with extraordinary courage at strategic times on his journey.

What emerges from this struggle is an extraordinarily humble and spiritually perceptive personality with the officer’s gift of leadership and an ability to inspire trust from his ‘men;’ but it was as though God left him with the soldier’s capacity for initiative together with the humility to have that initiative put to the test at strategic times in his life.

He resolved to beg his way first to Rome, to Venice, and thence to Jerusalem, where he had intended to spend the rest of his life, had he been permitted to do so. God most certainly didn’t smooth his path: the Provincial at Jerusalem had his hands full with pilgrims getting into trouble and getting taken by the Turks, and he didn’t want Ignatius giving him any more headaches, so he was told to leave, but not before he visited the Mount of Olives twice more - alone, and without a Turkish guide.

On his return journey in Italy he was arrested as a spy and kept in prison for some time, because he’d run into the maelstrom of the Italian wars. Once released by one side he was arrested by the other, and it was only a fellow Spaniard that got him out.

Now he decided to return to Spain and study, first at Barcelona, then Alcala, and finally at Salamanca, but the inquisition caught up with him and whilst waiting for a verdict, he spent time in prison. Having read his spiritual exercises, the inquisitors found no fault either in them or in Ignatius’s way of life, but forbade him to preach until he had studied another four years. Ignatius had already begun teaching and directing those who came to him for guidance, which, by now, had become his vocation, so concluding that there was no longer any point in staying in Spain, he made his way to Paris, although the war between France and Spain was in full progress.

In February 1528 Ignatius made it to Paris, where he was briefly a contemporary of John Calvin at the university, though they probably never met. Ignatius, perhaps through pride, had been taken too hastily through the higher studies, for all that he’d pursued them with some success, but he hadn’t learned the basics, so that well into his 30’s he was sitting with school children on the benches to study alongside them.

In Paris he experienced all kinds of problems with money and accommodation, and the fact that he had to beg his food didn’t give him time to attend lectures, but he was eventually advised that if he went to Flanders for a couple of months each year he’d soon be able to beg enough for his living during the remaining ten months. On one occasion he visited England where he got more alms than ever!

Unfortunately Ignatius attracted opposition because three friends to whom he had given the spiritual exercises didn’t do very well with them, and word got back. Spaniards in Paris ganged up on him, and he was reported to the inquisition; but he was released to pursue his studies which he completed successfully and left Paris in 1535, but not before he’d had to bring a notary to the judge’s house to receive a certificate of acquittal.

During this time, however, he gained the friendship of the future St Francis Xavier, whom he ‘Brought to the service of God.’

Back in his home country of Navarre for a while, his brother felt ashamed of his humble way of life, and although he took to teaching and preaching with some success, eventually he travelled to Valencia, and boarded a ship to Genoa, from whence he proceeded to Venice, where, at last, he and a few companions were ordained priest. Ignatius resolved not to offer his first Mass for a year, until he felt better prepared.

Once in Rome, as planned, Ignatius and his companions set up preaching in the various public squares, and gained a good deal of attention; though, as ever, accusations were brought, in this case by one or two people to whom he had given the spiritual exercises, but, after a public trial, Ignatius was not only acquitted, but his work and his Order received papal approval.

For the remainder of his life he lived in Rome, deep in the business of administration and organisation for the various institutions he and his companions set up. Ignatius died in 1556, by which time he had attracted more than a thousand followers, and founded colleges all over Catholic Europe, the Americas and the Far East.

Like Benedict, Ignatius had devised a flexible and thoroughly humane programme of spiritual exercises into which he had factored lessons he’d learned from his conflicts, failures and visions.

He had, however, specifically dedicated the Jesuit Order to the service of the papacy, in whatever the Pope chose to use them for the greater glory of God. An instrument of this kind in the hands of a human institution was always going to be open to misuse, and, like its founder, the order’s reputation has occasionally been sullied, but this shouldn’t prejudice our assessment of the real use and value Ignatius’s of spiritual exercises.

The programme can be undertaken as an entire and rather lengthy retreat, broken up into several weeks, which, on occasion and at the discretion of the spiritual director, can be extended. The programme can also be taken on in secular life, lasting anything between six and nine months this way, with a weekly visit to the director.

The programme is, and was always, intended for an elite few, who are seen to be in fit spiritual condition to be able to manage it, and, as such, it is not exclusive to Roman Catholics. The whole programme, and/or aspects of it, is widely taught in institutions that train spiritual directors, including our own London Diocesan Centre for spirituality in Lombard St, which is, however, a relatively recent foundation.

There are, of course, many and varied spiritual paths, and not all of them exclusively Christian, and certainly not all Christian programmes are exclusively Ignatian. The truth is that, however widely fostered, spiritual direction along Ignatian lines requires discernment in the selection of trainers, because, quite apart from selecting these and suitable directees, the essentially non-interventionist nature of the process can be experienced by the directee as somewhat ‘hit and miss;’ in this respect not dissimilar in reception from ‘interpretations’ offered to analysands by psychotherapists. To take an example from music: it is one thing to teach a moderately intelligent pupil to pass early and even middle-grade exams; quite another to instil into somebody the ‘feel’ for jazz improvisation.

This said, there are aspects of Ignatian spiritual direction that can be lifted and successfully applied in the use and teaching of most other paths; not least the imaginative participation in scenes from the bible, and the whole concept of what Ignatius described, rather scarily, as ‘discernment of spirits,’ which is, in reality, nothing more than helping the directee to understand and work positively with whatever [s]he may feel about their current relationship with God, which can vary considerably, even if someone is putting in the footwork with prayer and other spiritual disciplines.

Although a thorough awareness of ‘one’s sin’ is a part of any reputable spiritual path, one of the positive aspects of the Ignatian way is the ‘examen’ at the end of the day which is not merely an examination of conscience, but a look back at those times in the day when God has been present and close, and, cumulatively, its regular practice is bound to firm up a working faith.

The spiritual exercises are a prescribed formula, but within it the director is not, or shouldn’t be, intervening or instructing; teaching or advising: like most reputable SD, its point of departure from counselling/psychotherapy is that both parties work together to try to discern the movements of the Spirit. What this means is that, even more imperatively than in psychotherapy, the ‘director’ positively MUST be in their own ‘direction.’

With such a potentially useful and effective modus operandi, the danger is that of over-production in business; with expansion there can creep in a general drop in standards. Ignatian spirituality has been around now for nearly five centuries, and every effort is being made to refine and update its methods and application, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that the number of trainee directors with the right gifting will expand correspondingly, and the result can be that those eager to improve their relationship with God can be put off by formulaic and over-prescriptive direction.

As with any form of spiritual friendship, the most important thing is for both parties to be aware that there is a third present, and that to forget this reality is to fall into danger. In the case of Ignatian SD there are usually enough checks and balances to assist both ‘Director’ and ‘Directee’ to keep this in mind.