**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

27TH of DECEMBER JOHN THE APOSTLE

28TH of DECEMBER THE HOLY INNOCENTS

29th of DECEMBER THOMAS BECKET

31st of DECEMBER JOHN WYCLIFFE

2nd of JANUARY BASIL the GREAT and GREGORY of NAZIANZUS

JOHN THE APOSTLE, known in the east as John the Theologian [The Divine in the ‘King James Bible]. This honorific immediately presents us with the problem as to who was who. Was John the apostle the same as John the Evangelist, and where does John the Divine fit in?

We know from the synoptic Gospels that John and James were the sons of Zebedee, who, possibly together with Peter, ran a fishing business. The former pair of brothers were nicknamed by Jesus ‘Sons of Thunder,’ because of their impulsive natures, John having asked Jesus if he could call down fire and brimstone on some chancers who were trying to appropriate Jesus’ name.

In John’s account of Jesus’ various ‘trials’ he mentions that one disciple was able to work Peter’s entry into the palace where Jesus was being questioned, and it seems probable that this may have been John himself, in which case he would have had some connections with the religious authorities, and therefore some standing in his own right. If that is the case, then we would need to take on board the idea that John was, himself, the ‘disciple whom Jesus loved,’ but centuries-old tradition seems more certain of this than it perhaps has reason to be. Bishop Jack Spong, in his very thoughtful and challenging account of ‘The Fourth Gospel’ suggests that the beloved disciple may have been John’s symbolic characterisation of somebody who experienced a conversion of the heart.

Working backwards from Revelations, it seems all but conclusive that the author of the final book of the Bible was not the author of the Gospel, nor of the three letters of John. The Greek of the latter documents is different both in language grammar and style, and it is difficult to place this John either geographically, historically or theologically alongside the writers known as John the Apostle.

There are problems of theology and structure in John’s glorious Gospel that seem to indicate more than one author and/or editor of the document. What seems to be the consensus of scholarly opinion is that:

1. The greater part of the tradition written up in John is, indeed, of apostolic derivation: Polycarp, whom you may recall, knew John in his old age, and told Irenaeus that John had still been alive at the accession of Emperor Trajan in 98. If he was the youngest of the apostles and likely to have been born in about 6ce, his would have been an extraordinary but perfectly feasible lifespan, although it is on record that his last years saw him very much enfeebled.

2. whoever worked on writing up and editing these traditions left some seams, from which it is possible to deduce that however authentic the original apostolic tradition, the Gospel had been topped and tailed with the prologue and epilogue [ch21], and that the original ‘signs’ [chs2-12] had been ‘fortified’ with what are known as the ‘farewell discourses [ch13-12, and 15-16] and ch17, known as the ‘priestly prayer. This is easily detectable if you go from the end of ch14, to the beginning of ch18, which appears entirely seamless. So what we have at the end of all this is a Gospel compiled according to beliefs and traditions of the John’s followers.

3. Whereas it was thought until mid c20 that the Gospel was intended as a sort of theological gloss on the synoptic tradition, it seems that archaeology and more recently discovered writings have made its historicity in parts rather more secure than previously held, whilst, on the other hand, it is clear that John and his editors certainly did restructure the traditional material they used according to their own theological standpoint.

4. It was considered by some scholars that one or two of the ’Epistles ‘may not have been authentic to John, but it does seem likely that they may all have come from the ‘Elder ‘or other members of the Johannine Community in response to some of the same problems of disunity and in-party squabbles that Paul dealt with among his various flocks; i.e. Jews unable to make the clean break with the synagogue once the community had been expelled, and, on the other hand, Greek-speaking Jews and gentiles who were unable to swallow difficulties such as ‘eating my flesh…’ and doubted that Jesus had ever actually lived as a human. Viewed as one community leadership attempting to hold the ring among these various factions, you might think of our own church leaders speaking of ‘herding cats.’

Very strong tradition has it that John did move to Ephesus, where he grew old, and fostered and nurtured a tradition that probably did, however, eventually fracture, with the orthodox believers being absorbed into the main body of the church; the Judaizers and proto-Gnostics having gone their own way.

At the base of what seems to be rank antisemitism on the surface has to be read in context with the Test-benediction devised by Rabbi Gamliel II around 88 c e which finally forced the schism between orthodox Judaism and the Nazarenes, and ’other heretics.’ Obviously with Jesus and all the disciples having been Jews themselves, the term ‘Jews’ in John refers to the Jewish authorities by whose agency Jesus had been executed, and his followers now expelled from the synagogue, with many internal fractures within the community and a general loss of those whose faith would not allow them to suffer such an anathema. Feelings ran very high, and we know from our own experience that even the greatest minds and souls are not without some rancour.

Whatever the ins and outs of this discussion, we are compelled to acknowledge that John, as one of the’ inner circle’ of Jesus’ disciples, would have been as close to Jesus as anybody else.

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The HOLY INNOCENTS were, according to Matthew’s Gospel only, the dozen or so boys under the age of two years whom Herod the Great had massacred by his soldiers, having been tricked by the visiting magi. The story is part of Matthew’s attempt to model the life of Jesus on that of Moses: you may remember that Pharaoh ordered that all the male children of the Hebrews should be put to death, and that Moses brought his people from Egypt. Joseph takes Mary and Jesus into Egypt and waits until Herod has died before bringing them back. The children are viewed as martyrs not because they died in the faith, but because they died in Jesus’ place.

 The strong probability that this atrocity never happened at all matters very little: any of the historical records of Herod’s 40-year rule, supported by Rome, make it clear that he was an utter monster who never scrupled at murdering anybody he imagined might threaten his position, stand in his way, or offend his ‘amour propre.’ In this he stands as a representative example of all the self-obsessed and paranoid rulers who have ever victimised children in their pursuit of power and empire.

Any period of history – virtually any single year in history – can furnish instances at which innocent children have been sacrificed, often enough as ‘collateral damage’ of war, civil or otherwise, or of terrorism: or as child soldiers and prostitutes; hostages and shields, in the pursuit of conflicts that had nothing whatever to do with the lives of their families. Whether or not the massacre happened, the unnumbered and unrecorded legions of such children should be represented in an account of Jesus’ life.

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THOMAS BECKET was born in London in 1118 to a prosperous merchant family who were able to get him a good education. For a while he worked for another merchant, until entering the service of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury, who spotted his gifts and talents, and appointed him Archdeacon, giving Becket authority over all clergy except abbots and bishops. The archdeacon was known as ‘the eyes of the bishop, and was a primarily administrative post.

In 1072 William the Conqueror had given the church authority to deal with its own internal legal issues, including ‘Criminous Clerks.’ In the middle of the 12th century, you may remember that there was a civil war between the followers of Queen Maud – Matilda and King Stephen, who took the throne at the settlement of this war, on condition that Henry, Matilda’s son, should become king after Stephen’s death. During the chaos of this civil war the church courts had rather extended their powers in the absence of stable secular justice, so that when Henry II came to the throne, he needed to restore it in the face of a well-established ecclesiastical juris prudence.

Quite apart from all this, Henry needed to bring the barons under tighter control following the war during which they had behaved as local warlords, so that the king’s principal aim was to assert his control over the whole of his administration, otherwise the country would remain divided and unstable.

The maximum penalty a church court could hand down was excommunication; the maximum in a secular court was death. By the end of the anarchy church courts were exercising jurisdiction in regard to sexual morality: cases of rape and murder for which death was the penalty in the king’s court, could only be punished by imprisonment in a church court. The upshot was that people claimed to be clergy, because formalities for the admission to holy orders had not yet been properly managed in England, so that anyone with Latin, or who could read or write could claim benefit of clergy, not to mention that shaving the top of the head constituted proof of having taken monastic vows. Henry was twice thwarted in pursuit of two archdeacons; one for blackmail and the other for poisoning his superior, both acquitted in church courts.

You may also remember that towards the end of the 11th century there had been a series of good, strong and pious popes who had worked assiduously to make their writ run throughout the whole of Catholic Europe, so the balance of power between church and state in England most certainly needed revision and the establishment of legal and administrative boundaries.

Thomas was rising fast, and Henry appointed him Chancellor, another administrative role in which he supervised the issue and application of the king’s legislation. He also carried the king’s seal, the two men spent some time in each other’s company and became fast friends. Thomas was now Henry’s ‘main man’. Henry had already deployed him to go to Rome in support of the Pope’s confirmation of his right to the throne, and when Theobald died, after six years, Thomas, a good administrator who had become a close friend of the king, seemed an obvious and convenient choice to carry out Henry’s plans to cut back the church’s powers.

Much has been made of Thomas’s rapid transformation from the king’s ‘parvenue’ living high on the hog, with two pet wolves for hunting – to the ascetic archbishop, wearing a hair shirt like a monk, eating sparingly, praying and attending Mass daily and washing the feet of 30 poor men every night in his private cell. This is by no means unprecedented with Ambrose and Gregory the great examples of governors being catapulted into the office of bishop without the necessary spiritual training or background: both of whom proved to be outstanding prelates. Thomas was, if nothing else, conscientious in his work and in filling the broader requirements of the post, and he had worked at a high level in the church, and had been to Rome as a top diplomat. He had, moreover, warned Henry that creating him Archbishop of Canterbury could lead to divided loyalties.

Putting aside the drama, the conflict that ensued was by no means one between right and wrong but between two perfectly defensible positions that were incompatible. Henry required his archbishop to sign off on a whole series of changes known as the ‘Constitutions of Clarendon’ that would have left the church bereft of any significant legal jurisdiction, but by the same token he instituted changes to the secular legal system known as the ‘Assize of Clarendon’ that have lasted until the present day, making crime an offence against ’the king’s peace’ rather than a matter of local insult: criminals could no longer flee safely from one local jurisdiction to another without that sheriff bearing responsibility for apprehending and returning the criminal for trial. Among these reforms was the instigation, now nationwide, of jury trials.

The difficulty was that these were both rather proud unbending men, and the fact that they had been close friends left Henry feeling that Thomas had shown rank ingratitude for everything he had done for him, an attitude supported by some of his bishops. Given Henry’s need to stamp his authority on the government of the country, Thomas’s intransigence must have felt like a threat.

As the historian Susan Wise Bauer puts it, when the two met in a meadow in northern France to try to resolve their differences, each had an ace card to play. Henry wanted his son’s tutor and archbishop to crown his son heir to the throne, and Thomas carried authority from the Pope to excommunicate the entire country. There is no record of their long conversation, but Henry assured Thomas that he could take up his post again safely. Meanwhile his confiscated lands had been handed to someone else who was in no hurry to give them back. Thomas, on his part, refused to land in England until he had every yard of church land restored to him. In due course they were returned, but with every asset stripped from it, so that there was not a single ox, cow, horse, pig, sheep, capon or hen to be found, and not a bin filled with corn.

Arriving back in England, Thomas immediately excommunicated the Archbishop of York and six bishops who had, in the meantime, crowned Henry’s son; and, naturally enough, did not fail to excommunicate the previous owner of his lands. The constitutions forbade excommunication of anybody without the king’s say-so, and effectively Thomas had made it clear that he intended to fight ‘to the death’ and the rest is history, and not T S Eliot’s play.

Nowhere is it recorded that Henry ever uttered those famous words: ‘will nobody rid me of this turbulent priest!’ but on hearing of the excommunications he flew into one of his towering rages, and the four knights who were with him in France at the time, travelled to England, borrowed a troop of armed men and hot-footed it to the cathedral. These were four of the most powerful men in the land, and close associates of Henry, who, incidentally, had breached the Henry’s Assize of Clarendon by murdering Thomas, but they were never punished. Henry had no need to act his grief: Thomas had been a close friend and useful minister, and he could not be unaware of the gravity of what had happened, almost certainly, at least, with his acquiescence.

Did Thomas ‘stage manage’ his own death? If he knew, which he must have, that an attempt would be made on his life it was natural for him to dress in his finest robes, to leave the cathedral door open and to place himself between the shrine of Mary and that of St Benedict, if only to afford himself the best moral defence available, and as a warning to his murderers of the unique gravity of what they were intending to do; that is hardly stage-managing but merely the application of the strongest moral and spiritual means of defence at his disposal.

Eye-witness accounts of the murder which, in the tradition of martyrdoms, spare no details. During the reign of Henry’s youngest son, John, the Pope pronounced an interdict on the whole of England, so the struggle continued, on and off until the reformation.

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JOHN WYCLIFFE was born in Richmond, North Yorkshire in around 1124, and died in 1184. Some details of his early life are obscure, but it is certain that he lectured at Baliol College, and he may have been master there. After a while he took a succession of college livings, the last being that of Lutterworth in Leicestershire, but he spent a great deal of time at court, writing documents, some of which became pamphlets, usually about abuses of the English church by Rome, an old chestnut going back to Anglo-Saxon times.

At some time between 1166 and ’72 he travelled to Bruges on behalf of Edward III to meet papal representatives. In 1172 he became Doctor of Theology, and in 1176 he published ‘Dominia Divina’ in which he stated that all authority derives from divine grace, and can be forfeited when rulers fail to meet their obligations and responsibilities. The Pope became alarmed at his views and sent a few bulls to England requiring the king, the bishops or the university to place Wycliffe in prison, but he had friends in high places.

Around 1380 he wrote that people had no need of the Pope and that clergy are not engraced to forgive sins, which was like a red rag to a bull, since not only would such a doctrine make the clergy redundant, but the recently instigated and very lucrative trade in indulgences would dry up.

Next Wycliffe claimed that the bread at the Eucharist remained bread, and not the body of Christ, [though, importantly, he insisted that Christ was nonetheless present] and not only did he write these things, but, especially for an academic, he had a preaching style with a common touch, which he deployed from his pulpit at Lutterworth. He also ceased writing in Latin, and published his opinions in English; furthermore, with the help of some sympathetic colleagues, he translated the whole of the bible into English. Eventually his opinions were condemned at a convocation at Oxford, and his followers, known as ‘Lollards’ were imprisoned.

Wycliffe himself seemed to possess a charmed life, very largely because he was protected by King Edward’s eldest surviving son, John of Gaunt, who used him for his own purposes.

When we think of John of Gaunt, perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is Shakespeare’s speech about ‘this sceptered isle,’ but, in fact, he was extremely unpopular, even with his brothers. The real reason why he became the ‘bete noir’ during the peasants’ revolt was that he had the job of co-ordinating the collection of the poll tax, and his Savoy Palace was one of the first targets of the mob, and had he not been absent he would most certainly have been lynched, as was Archbishop Simon Sudbury when the Tower of London was occupied.

It is also important to bear in mind that the late 14th century saw the papacy at one of its very lowest ebbs, with Catherine of Siena and Bridget of Sweden, among others, working prayerfully and assiduously to try to put things right.

Since the Black Death around 1349 the working population had been significantly reduced, and labourers were able to demand fair wages. The government took it upon itself to cap wages, and the poll tax, levied to fund war with France, was actually collected three times before the revolt broke out. A recent book on the subject, ‘England arise,’ makes it clear not only that the destruction was far more discriminating than traditional historians would have us believe, but that it was quite often actually led and co-ordinated by members of the knightly class: Watt Tyler appears relatively late in the day.

It would be a mistake to think of Wycliffe and the Lollards either as a party, as it were, with everybody singing from the same hymn-sheet, or of Wycliffe himself as the sole driver of what was a far broader tendency towards lay spirituality in C14 that also had its expressions in the mystics and in literature, particularly Piers Plowman, in which the common man is asking all kinds of awkward questions, and becomes Pope at the end, instigating a series of reforms. Wycliffe believed in all things held in common, which is not a million miles from the famous tag of John Ball – himself a poor priest - at the peasants’ revolt: ‘When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then a gentleman?’

Neither should we think of Wycliffe and his followers as being quite as ‘way out’ as contemporaries tried to position them. They were not against the institution of the priesthood, in fact Wycliffe chose poor priests to spread his message, a significant part of which was an emphasis on private prayer and charitable works. One Lollard sermon suggests that a good ‘Paternoster’, said earnestly and with charity was more pleasing to God than a lot of Masses, chantries, foundations etc. The grievance was against clergy who lived comfortably and mumbled through the liturgy without the least devotion.

Whilst it is the case that many Lollards were imprisoned, and that the movement was largely supressed, if we think of 14th-century lay spirituality with a broader brush, it becomes clear not only that the papacy had been unpopular long before the time of Wycliffe, but that elements of dissent survived through to the reformation, at which time there was a variety of Protestants around with very different opinions, and that some of these were the inheritors of the Lollard tradition.

Formally, of course, a generation or two after Wycliffe’s death, the Bohemian Jan Hus, who was heavily influenced by him, was betrayed and burned at the stake at the council of Constance in 1415, which set off what became, effectively, a religious civil war in the country, and, without overstating the further influence of the Hussites on Luther, it was certainly there.

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BASIL THE GREAT and GREGORY NAZIANZUS were two of the three CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS, the third of whom was GREGORY of NYSA, the younger brother of Basil, who has appeared already.

These two should probably be dealt with separately, but there are good reasons for celebrating them together, in which case, Gregory of Nysa should be included with them. Basil made a speciality of monasticism, and was an extrovert and a communicator and organiser, whereas Gregory had different personality and gifts.

Basil, the eldest of the brothers in a family of nine headed up by sister Macrina, came from a well-off Christian family of which the father had died young, leaving his wife and Macrina to assist in the upbringing of the remaining siblings. In time the two set up a community of women once the brothers had flown the nest. Basil received the best education, finishing in Athens, where he met Gregory, a student from a similar Christian background, and the two fast became friends for life.

Basil taught Rhetoric and Philosophy for a while, until, perhaps influenced by the family-run community, he undertook a great deal of research on monasticism, visiting Egypt, Syria Palestine and Mesopotamia, choosing the community model over that in which monks lived very largely apart, meeting only occasionally. Basil’s rule is followed in most monasteries of the Eastern Church, and was known to Benedict, so that some elements entered the western tradition too.

When their studies ended Gregory had returned to Nazianzen to assist his father who was bishop there, until Basil, also seeking greater solitude, came to join him for two years, before moving off to Caesarea to support Bishop Eusebius. Basil also wrote a famous treatise on the Holy Spirit, which reads somewhat tediously for a modern student because so much of it is written in opposition to other people’s opinions.

The problem at this time in the eastern church was the strength and influence of Arianism, the movement within the church, and subsequently among the ‘Barbarian’ invaders that Christ had been created by the Father, and was therefore of lesser status, which knocked a hole in the doctrine of the Trinity. Emperor Valens was of this persuasion and had appointed a patriarch in Constantinople to his liking, and at the death of Eusebius, Valens tried to obstruct Basil’s efforts to restore Trinitarian belief by splitting the archdiocese into two. At this point Basil applied a good deal of pressure on Gregory to take up the newly created post at Tyana, in order that the two of them might work in partnership, but Gregory’s father was still alive, so he preferred to remain in Nazianzen to support him.

At the death of his father, Gregory became bishop in his place, but almost against his will, the brilliant orator and theologian that he was could not be left in such an isolated place, when, at the death of Valens, the See of Constantinople fell vacant, and Gregory was consecrated although by this time his health had broken and he was bent over, and walked with a stick. At this time the two Gregories met at Constantinople – Gregory of Nysa, Basil’s younger brother, and worked together to restore orthodoxy, clearing out the Arians from the high positions they had held in Valens’ time. By the time Gregory [of Nazianzus] retired the problem of Arianism had been dealt with and the Council of Constantinople in 381 adopted the Nicene Creed.

Basil died in 379, but Gregory lived on quietly after retirement until his own death in 389.

The Cappadocian fathers deserve a great deal more attention than this: they were poets, contemplatives and defenders of orthodoxy as well as brilliant orators and theologians.