**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

7th of DECEMBER AMBROSE [from last week!]

8TH of DECEMBER JANE FRANCES de CHANTAL

12TH of DECEMBER LUCY

13TH of DECEMBER SAMUEL JOHNSON

AMBROSE of MILAN [339-97] is best known for two things; his vital role in the conversion and formation of St Augustine, and the Ambrosian liturgy and chant, which still exists in some churches around Milan, though in a rather diluted form.

Ambrose, the son of the Roman prefect of Gaul, was born in Trier, which was an old established Roman foundation since Julius Caesar conquered it, and seat of government of the western empire: Athanasius had been exiled there, and Jerome spent some time there in his youth.

When Ambrose’ father died, his mother brought the family back to Rome, where Ambrose’ sister Marcelina saw to it that he and his brother Satyrus were well brought up and educated in the classics and in rhetoric, in the manner that would suit them for a career as lawyers and statesmen like their father. At a time when knowledge of Greek was disappearing from the western empire Ambrose achieved extraordinary proficiency in the language, and his eloquence and energy also set him apart.

As soon as his studies were at an end Ambrose was given an important job in Rome, but very soon afterwards Emperor Valentinian I brought him to Milan and appointed him governor of Aemilia and Liguria in northern Italy. He was still not much more than 30 and had already risen to one of the highest and most prestigious jobs in the empire; while Rome was still the historic centre of the empire, Milan had become the centre of government.

Two years previously the Bishop of Milan had died, and Empress Justina, regent for the time being, was an Arian, and was keen to fill the vacancy with an Arian bishop, and when opposing mobs of Arians and Catholics threatened to set upon each other Governor Ambrose hurried to the Cathedral square to try to make peace. So persuasive was his eloquence that a voice was heard – most people think it was that of a child, calling for Ambrose to be made bishop. The crowd took up the cry, and Ambrose assumed that, emotion having won out temporarily over good sense and canonical protocol, nothing much would come of this, the more so because, like many Christians at the time, he had deferred his baptism until later in life, and nobody would sanction an unbaptised bishop and since Nicea a newly baptised person could not become a bishop either, so Ambrose assumed he was safe.

An episcopal appointment had to be ratified by a council of bishops, and Ambrose couldn’t imagine that such an august body would waive canon law, but he was mistaken: when Emperor Valentinian expressed his pleasure that one of his governors should be honoured with the position of bishop, Ambrose fled to the house of a friend who was a senator, but when this man discovered that the emperor had approved Ambrose’ appointment he dobbed him in.

Like Augustine, a generation later, we might be tempted to imagine that this show of reluctance to be bishop could have arisen from Christian humility, or even that it might be a show only. When a new speaker in our parliament is elected he has to be dragged to the chair by two members: we forget that in c17 the post of Speaker carried risk of arrest and even execution: Ambrose had united the opposing forces for a few minutes in the square, but as bishop he was truly up against it. He was quickly baptised, however, and a week later, on December 7th 374 he was ordained bishop.

After 20 years of Arianism in Milan a great deal had to be done. Ambrose brother Satyrus resigned his governorship of another province and came to share the admin so that, very importantly, Ambrose was freed up to exercise the office of bishop as he wished, which was chiefly as pastor and author.

Ambrose had come from a rich aristocratic family, and on becoming Bishop followed in the steps of other newly appointed bishops by first providing for Marcelina, and then giving all his substance to the poor. He had already proved an exemplary governor, and he now pursued an open-door policy so that anybody from any stratum of society could walk in and speak with him; a facility that both the young Augustine and Monica, his mother, would find useful in time. Ambrose made ground rules, however: no match-making and no badgering for imperial appointments!

Meanwhile Ambrose set to work to study the Bible and the fathers, for which work he engaged a humble but very learned priest named Simplicianus; and it was at this point that his extensive knowledge of Greek came into play, because he could read not only the New Testament, but also Athanasius, Origen and Basil. One of Ambrose’ great achievements was to help stream some of the Greek learning into the Latin tradition. This also appears to have included elements of Greek liturgical practice and music. One of the fruits of this study was his attempt to harmonise the four Gospels, and another was to begin to unpack the meaning of the various layers of biblical interpretation that Gregory the great refined more than a century later.

Ambrose was not only generous with his substance, but also with his time, making himself generally available in a way no bishop could normally have afforded to do, but for the help of his brother Satyrus. Without actually introducing the therapeutic hour, [50 minutes with the client and 10 to oneself] Ambrose would break up his interviews with periods of prayer and meditation. It is suggested that the reason why most of his writings are mercifully short is down to the fact that he spent so much time with his flock.

Within a very short time after his consecration Ambrose was indeed up against the machinations of the regent Justina, who, after the death of Emperor Valentinian, was determined to re-establish Arianism in Milan, and appointed a renegade Arian bishop to her court, and, with many Gothic soldiers in town, who had been converted by Arians, Justina demanded from Ambrose the use of a church for their worship, and he refused blankly. When threatened with force he simply replied: ‘I have said what a bishop must say; now let the emperor do what an emperor should. Naboth would not give up the inheritance of his ancestor, and should I give up the inheritance of Jesus Christ?’ while Justina sent soldiers to take over the basilica, Ambrose and his supporters got there first, and while the soldiers surrounded the building, hoping to starve the congregation out before they being ordered to storm the church, a general fast commenced inside, with prayers and hymns: one of the faithful being St Monica, the mother of Augustine.

HEADS UP: technical stuff coming!!!

During this time Ambrose took the opportunity to teach his congregation new forms and ways of singing. Previously in the Latin liturgy the only music had been the singing of psalms by the choir, with very short responses between verses by the people. It is thought that it was at this point that Ambrose introduced antiphonal singing, whereby the congregation is split in two and each takes it in turn to sing a verse. He is also said to have taught them melodies that he composed himself.

We know rather more about Ambrose as a hymn-writer than as a director of music. Some of his hymns still exist, and one is still in use today. We know that he wrote four-line verses with 8 syllables in each line, so that we can assume they would have been sung to the same tune, although melodies themselves were as interchangeable as they are today by any organist consulting the metrical index at the end of any hymn book.

It does seem likely that Ambrose did introduce hymn-singing to his congregations, which was new in the west, though it seems likely that early hymns may have been sung to popular secular melodies that were well-known and easy to sing, but, of course, we cannot discover these at this remove. If Ambrose wrote his own tunes he might have taught them to the choir first, because, listening to an intelligent guess as to what his chant may have sounded like, by marcel Peres and Ensemble Organum, it is difficult to imagine how a congregation of varying singing ability might have found their way in unison round Peres’s rather complex vocal embellishments. Moreover we have no idea of rhythmical expression in reliable notation until the eleventh century.

The Milanese rite is the only one of the Gallican group still performed in certain churches in the Milan diocese, but it is impossible to know for sure what the originals sounded like, principally because of efforts to standardise the whole western European rite to the ‘Roman’ over many centuries. At the Council of Trent any rite that could be proved as having been established before 1370 was permitted, and whilst the Milanese fought hard to retain what they could, thanks largely to St Charles Borromeo, Peres’ well researched and intelligent recording is likely to remain the best there is.

Ambrose made it his life’s work to eliminate Arianism from Italy, and was ably assisted with the support of Emperors Gratian and Theodosius [The Great] who came over from Constantinople. He also managed to assert the power of the church over that of the emperor, admittedly with the benevolent co-operation of Theodosius whose humility and close friendship were highly unusual, but after an appalling atrocity in Thessalonica resulting in the massacre of thousands of men, women and children as punishment for a serious riot, Ambrose wrote a private letter, which we have today, expressing real hurt and disappointment, stating that if the emperor were to appear in church Ambrose would be compelled to stop the liturgy. Theodosius, who could have had Ambrose exiled or executed, humbly underwent penance for some months, until being let back into church at Christmas. He said of Ambrose that he was the only man he had ever met worthy to be a bishop, and much later, when he died it was in Ambrose’ arms.

Of his writings, one of the most famous is his treatise to Emperor Gratian, who wished to be sure of Catholic doctrine while contesting the Arians.

While the young Augustine was still searching, he was persuaded to attend church to hear Ambrose speak, which he did, and in time came to appreciate not only the way in which Ambrose presented his material but some elements of its truth, and the rest we know. Augustine also drew inspiration and learned much simply from availing himself of Ambrose’ open door, and learned from his times of prayer and meditation.

Like Augustine and even Jerome, Ambrose worked to synthesise what he could from the classics into his understanding of Christian doctrine and ethics, but, above all, it was his hands-on and practical working and listening to his people that enabled him to put together an easily accessible system of Christian ethics. He is one of the four great doctors of the church, together with Augustine, Jerome and Gregory the Great, and was thoroughly worthy to be esteemed as one of the greatest saints.

**\*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\***

JANE-FRANCES de CHANTAL was born in Dijon in 1572, the much-loved daughter of a well-to-do lawyer and public servant. She lost her mother, giving birth to her brother Andre, while she was still very young.

Jane led the life of a bright, cultured young woman; pious but without the first hint of a religious vocation as such, and at about age 20 she was married to Baron Christophe de Chantal with whom she had four children who lived, but two who were stillborn.

Her life managing the estate in the country suited her: many of the French aristocracy had lost lands during the wars of religion, and Jane was able to help restore things, discovering, in the process, that she had a talent for organisation. Christophe travelled a good deal with the court, but when he was at home Jane ran parties and was a more than competent mistress of the house.

Just after the birth of her fourth surviving child Christophe went riding on the estate in a hunting party and was accidentally shot by a friend, and died shortly afterwards. Jane fell into very deep depression, not the least of the cause being her efforts to resist family pressures to re-marry. Meanwhile her father had acquiesced in Jane’s moving the family to the estate of her father-in-law, an old man with a deplorable temper who had set up house with a servant and their adult children, so that her quality of life deteriorated markedly.

Knowing something of Jane’s hankering after religion, her father invited her to Dijon for a sermon to be given by a celebrity preacher who turned out to be St Francis de Sales, who was Bishop of Geneva. Jane sat in the front row, in her black widow’s weeds, hanging on Francis’ every word, and afterwards, in the vestry, Francis asked somebody who happened to be Jane’s brother Andre whether he knew anything of this woman. Andre immediately offered to introduce them. There is a story that while Jane had been riding round the estate of her father-in-law a face had appeared out of a hedge, and a voice had told her: ‘this is the man to whom you will entrust your whole life,’ and Jane recognised that face. Be that as it may, we can discern one of God’s famous ‘co-incidences.’

The two took to each other right from the start, and Jane confided all her feelings and aspirations to Francis. Both had planned to visit the shrine of St Claude, and they talked all night. The following day Francis, looking as though he hadn’t slept a wink, told Jane that he’d been praying all night and had come to understand that she had been entrusted to him, so that a formal agreement was signed, and Jane became one of Francis directees. The problem was that Francis needed to maintain his busy life as a bishop, so that much of their relationship survives in the form of letters, which express the most gentle and tender mutual love.

Francis comes up early in the New Year, and has already been mentioned in connection with Louise de Marillac, the friend and collaborator of Vincent de Paul. When Francis died in 1622, he had, in fact, made arrangements for Vincent to assume responsibility for Jane and her ministry.

One of the many aspects of the Christian life that Francis opened up was ministry among the laity. From the time of the Desert Fathers, and throughout the middle ages, the work of the church became increasingly restricted to those in ordained ministry. The secular clergy – friars – and lay movements such as the Beguines, had challenged this monopoly, but Francis took the view that anybody anywhere could [and should] cultivate their relationship with God, and he worked hard to make this possible. He was probably one of the most approachable and attractive of all the saints.

Understandably Jane wanted to get away from where she and the family were living as quickly as possible, but Francis counselled caution: where she was precisely where God was calling her to be at that time; she should work to accept and even to love her widowhood. He wrote to her that he, as her director, was one pillar of her spiritual life, and her widowhood another. Whilst Francis encouraged Jane to attend Mass whenever she was able, and to set up an ‘inner monastery’ of devotion, he also stressed the importance of listening for the presence of God at all times during her day. He wrote:

‘Our souls must give birth, not outside themselves but inside themselves; to the sweetest, gentlest and most beautiful child imaginable; it is Jesus whom we must bring to birth and produce in ourselves, and you are pregnant with him, my dear sister, and praised be God who is his father.’

These few words enshrine Francis’ idea, thoroughly based in tradition, that each of us nurtures the Word and brings Jesus into life in the world. For Jane, having had six pregnancies and lost two, this was a potent image. For some years Jane worked towards this aspiration faithfully on the estate, amid all her difficulties.

Another teaching of Francis to his directees was that people of like spiritual bent should reach out and share their lives and their aspirations for spiritual growth with others, to their mutual benefit and wrote on the subject, but more importantly, he actively pursued his notion that friendship should not merely be a means of mutual support but that it could be creative as well, of events, happenings, institutions and of movements. He and his old friend Antoine Favre wanted to create an institution that would support science the arts and all aspects of the new learning so that the fruits of this friendship would result in the enrichment of the whole community.

Francis writes of the ‘golden chains’ of friendship, as opposed to the chains of iron, that constrict the person through envy, control and other selfish motives: to Jane he wrote:

‘I had never intended for there to be any connection between us that carries any obligation except than love and true Christian friendship whose binding force St Paul calls ; ‘the bond of perfection’ Truly it is just that, because it is indissoluble and will not slacken. All other bonds are temporary, even that of vows of obedience that are broken by death and other occurrences, but the bond of love grows in time and takes on new power by enduring. It is exempt from the severance of death whose scythe cuts down everything except love. Love is as strong as death and more powerful than hell, Solomon says. This is our bond; these are our chains, which the more they restrain and press upon us the more they give us ease and liberty. Their power is only sweetness; their force is only gentleness. Nothing is more pliable; nothing so solid as they are. Therefore consider me intimately linked with you and do not be anxious to understand more about it except that this bond is not contrary to any other bond, whether it be of a vow or of marriage.

Later in their relationship he writes:

‘…when you confessed to me in greater detail a remarkable bond was forged in my soul that calls me to cherish your soul more and more. This made me write to you that God had given me to you, not thinking that the affection I felt in my spirit could possibly be increased especially by praying to God for you, but now, my dear daughter, a certain new quality has emerged that it seems I cannot describe, only its effect is a great interior sweetness that I have to wish for you a perfect love of God and other spiritual blessings. …Each affection is different from others: the one I have for you has a certain quality which consoles me infinitely and if all were known is considerably profitable to me.’

There were conventions of letter-writing at this time that allowed for rather more effusive expressions of emotion than we might be comfortable with today in our culture of emails, and Francis and Jane were both aware that their affection – their passionate affection – could be misunderstood, though certainly not by Jane, and as each saint grew in their own love of God the bond between them strengthened, but unlike the bonds of marriage in which lives are, in theory, at least, totally conjoined, their friendship had the quality both of intimacy and openness.

By 1622, when Jane was busy with her foundations and Francis was leading a hectic life, Jane, who was suffering a good deal of dryness and aridity in her spiritual life, wanted to speak to Francis both about this and about foundation business. When they met Francis regretted that he had only an hour to spare, so that the business took priority, and Francis promised that the next time they met they could discuss Jane’s difficulties. Unfortunately soon afterwards Francis took ill and died, but when Jane visited the monastery where the bishop lay, she was granted special permission to spend time with him. She recalls that she knelt and shared everything that was in her heart in his presence, and that answers came to her as though he were still alive.

This entirely spiritual love leads to their collaboration in the creation of the foundation Jane cherished in her heart, which came to be known as the Oder of the Visitation, the visitation being Mary’s to Elizabeth early in Luke’s Gospel. The community was for women; those who, for one reason and another, had no special place in the church, for all that they may cherish a strong and mature love of God that they wished to nurture, so that widows, the disabled, and those who lacked a vocation to the cloister could take yearly vows and come together in a community. What was almost entirely new was that space was made for married women who might simply wish to take time off for retreat, which in those days would have been unheard-of.

Once a woman had established some kind of formation they could go out into the world and support the community, though this was not an apostolic charism, but simply a part of being Christian. Jane herself, as Baroness, would have undertaken or supervised this kind of work, and kept a dispensary on her estate.

In 1610, Jane, her friend Charlotte, her daughter Jacqueline and several servants took formal leave of her father-in-law’s estate, to commence her new life back in Annecy, with the whole town turning out to see her off on her new enterprise. Her son who was still a teenager, waited for the moment when all the formal farewells had been said, to read a prepared letter to his mother that she was doing all this while stepping over her son’s body, and he proceeded to lie down across the doorstep. Both he and Jane were in tears as she stepped over him, and some church dignitaries who were present chided the Baroness for not being sufficiently detached, to which she replied that she was a mother too. Years later her son wrote to Jane to tell her that she could not have been a better mother, but some of the mud stuck.

The communities mushroomed all over France, and Jane died in 1641, with the community known, as Francis wished, as the hidden violets of the Church.

Voy had been less affected by the terrible French wars of religion that lasted on and off between 1572 and 1598, ending formally with the edict of Nantes and the ascent of Henry IV to the French throne after his famously expedient conversion to Catholicism [‘Paris is worth a Mass]. There were, however, still extreme, or, perhaps, fervent Catholics who were discontent with Henry’s hollow conversion and the edict of Nantes, and, in fact, Jane’s brother Andre was kidnapped and held to ransom by a gang of these extremists during her lifetime.

One can only marvel at the quality of some of the spirituality that emerged from these terrible wars; among them St Francis and Jane; St Vincent and Louise de Marillac, and the next generation of great French churchmen such as Caussade and Bossuet, though we might ’step over’ the two most famous, Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin!

In 1685 Louis Quatorze revoked the edict of Nantes and the whole struggle between Catholics and Huguenots started up, though this time the latter had little alternative but to emigrate, to the enrichment of France’s neighbours and to the great impoverishment of France herself. By 1789 the [Catholic] church had become so generally detested that many priestly and monastic heads rolled; partly, at least, as a consequence of intolerance.

**\*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\***

If you have read James Boswell’s classic account of the life of SAMUEL JOHNSON [1709-84] your first thought of him may be as a ready wit and even a somewhat opinionated conversationalist, so you might be tempted to ask what he is doing on the Anglican calendar of saints! With a bit of prompting your memory might then throw up his life-long charity, in particular how he kept a house full of somewhat eccentric and occasionally difficult friends, such as the blind Mrs Williams, and the gentle way he treated Frank, his black servant, to whom he had evidently become extremely attached.

On re-opening the ‘Life,’ however, you would find the occasional well thought-out and articulated prayers that could only possibly have come from a mind and spirit of considerable wisdom, maturity and personal humility.

Atwell points to Johnson’s life-long support of the Church of England, to which you might respond: ‘so what [!]’ until you read his conversation in context with that of friends of all classes and abilities, and realise that such support came at considerable emotional and spiritual cost. When John Humphreys asked Rowan Williams whether he could manage to exist, as he put it, between ‘My God, why have you forsaken me[?]’ and the resurrection, Rowan replied in on word: ‘Just.’ For all his vociferous support of the Church and Christianity as a whole, it seems that Johnson’s position might have been somewhat similar.

We might think of ‘Dr Johnson’s’ life as having been crowned with success; that he had a gift for friendship which he deployed to the utmost among a very wide circle, including George III and most of the highest achievers among the arts and, for that matter, the church. Gordon Mursell, in his account of English spirituality, suggests, however, that all this energy stemmed from Johnson’s desperate loneliness after the death of his wife Tetty after a difficult marriage of some 17 years. He points out that another of Johnson’s familiar companions was the ‘black dog:’ he suffered from frequent bouts of depression, and that, whatever his celebrity, particularly in later life, Johnson undoubtedly thought of himself as a failure, certainly in spiritual terms.

Boswell stresses, particularly in his account of Johnson’s early days, how odd was his physical appearance, and how he had to compensate for eccentricities of gesture with his outwardly forceful character that won him his wife, despite her deeply felt reservations about him as a potential lover.

He could often seem, and occasionally actually be quite abrasive but equally able to apologise graciously and make amend for an offence and make up quarrels. Like any achiever, he attracted critics, and was not above envy, particularly of David Garrick who had been his pupil during their early obscurity, but re-reading the ‘Life’ what comes off the page is the sense of a level-headed and erudite character who, of course, was almost entirely self-taught, being the son of a humble bookseller who kept a market-stall, and was always aware of his limitations.

The least we can say of Johnson is that he played a difficult hand to the very best of his ability, and that he earned his place in society and held it in the face of immense physical, social and emotional handicaps. From a Christian perspective, it seems fair to assert that, not only was he able to do so with the help of a deep faith, but that he was forever humbly aware of God’s input in his life. He was universally respected as a moralist, and reading Boswell’s account of his life, which lacks the least trace of hagiography, it should be possible to answer the question fulsomely as to what he might be doing on the Anglican calendar of saints.

**\*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\***

LUCY, who was martyred in 304 during the terrible Dioclesian persecutions, was a Sicilian who, on becoming a Christian, gave away all her possessions, and was seemingly betrayed by her fiancé who thought all of it should have come to him at their marriage.

Her name derives from the Latin Lux meaning light, so that her cult has carried various related associations.

**\*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\***

JOHN of the CROSS was born Juan de Yepes, in 1532, the son of a poor weaver, and he never forgot his background. His father had come from a rich merchant family collecting the work of weavers like Juan’s mother, who worked in a ‘cottage industry.’ The big merchant’s son fell for the humble weaver, married her and his father cut him off from the family so that the couple struggled in what some commentators describe as ‘genteel poverty,’ but it is not clear what distinction they make by the use of the word. The couple had three sons, of whom Juan was the youngest. Luis died young, but Francisco, the eldest, had learning difficulties, and Juan remained deeply attached to him throughout his life.

When Juan was still a toddler his father died, and Catalina was left to bring up the two remaining sons as a single parent; her father-in-law refused to support the family. Juan remained forever devoted to his mother. Although no physical weakling, he never grew taller than five feet.

Catalina got her son into the Jesuit catechism school at Medina del Campo, where the family now lived. The nuns soon realised he was bright, and Juan was sent to the University at Salamanca, at that time the finest in Spain. He learned poetry and literature there as well as religious studies; and would have been influenced by the tradition of students singing poetry and ballads. John of the Cross is famous as a poet quite apart from his influence on Christian spirituality: he is ranked among the top poets in Spain.

Having been educated by the Jesuits, whose influence he continued to value, among the 12 monastic houses at Medina del Campo, where the family lived, Juan chose to enter the Carmelites, a community, originally of hermits who had formed in the Holy land in the 13th century, from whence they were driven out by the Muslims, and spread over Europe. Following a conference in England at the end of the 13th century, they discerned that God required them to transform to an order of friars, serving their communities and spreading the Gospel, whilst maintaining what they could of their contemplative origins.

Juan had already been working for the Jesuit Foundation where he had received his primary education, and now he took service in a hospice for whose funding he begged in the streets, and attended patients as what we would call an orderly, so that practical charity was an essential part of his formation, however tempting it may be to think of John of the Cross as a pure contemplative. Bearing this in mind, it is perhaps easier to understand his having opted for the Carmelites, and another major influence was a book of Carmelite history by a Catalan named Philip Ribot, which used to be read at Teresa’s houses during mealtimes, and contained many and varied exciting anecdotes.

At this time one of his professors was Luis de Leon, another famous theologian and spiritual director whose sharp tongue and arrogance rather made him his own worst enemy and got him into trouble with the inquisition, but it is important to understand that there was a whole constellation of important Christian stars in 16th-century Spain as well as the big three; Ignatius, Teresa and John himself. For whatever reason, perhaps the atmosphere around Luis, John chose not to become an academic theologian, although it seems clear that he could have done had he so chosen. As it was the authorities at the Carmelite house in Salamanca appointed John student leader, helping and supervising his fellows in their study.

At his profession, Juan de Yepes took the name of Juan de San Matthias, and it was not until his ordination and his association with Teresa that he took the name John of the Cross. Incidentally the saint whom we know as Teresa of Avila is known in Spain by her adopted name Teresa of Jesus.

Teresa had been for some time seeking friars who would take care of her nuns’ formation and spiritual direction, and she had heard of John. At the time of their first meeting John had been contemplating a change to the Carthusians, but Teresa convinced him to stay and help with her reforms, which John agreed to do on condition that they got on with the job, so that Teresa took John to visit her foundation at Valladolid, and soon realised that he understood exactly what she wanted to achieve.

After 20 years in the same monastic foundation, Teresa had realised that she needed an environment of greater and more fervent spirituality, but she went about things in a single-minded way that attracted criticism and enmity from the Carmelites of origin, and whilst she had to deal with much of this, John no doubt presented a far softer target for the conservatives, and he was in his cell praying when some of his enemies, together with several armed men broke in, kidnapped him and brought him 60 miles away to Toledo, where they imprisoned him in very rough conditions. The story goes that each week he would be made to take bread and water from the refectory floor after which he would be encircled by the rest of the brothers and whipped in turn by each of them, the scars remaining on his back for the rest of his life.

After six months the regime changed and it seems likely that a new jailor saw to it that his conditions improved, and probably facilitated his escape after another three months. It is difficult to imagine how a seriously weakened prisoner could make a rope, let himself down by it and clamber over various roof tops to safety, but that is the story. He made it to a convent where he was hidden and looked after, but after a few days only, and still unwell, he travelled down to Andalusia where he remained for ten years, travelling between foundations and yearning to return to Castile. In 1580 Teresa obtained King Philip II’s intervention to end the struggles among the Carmelites, to separate the reformed – discalced – Carmelites from the others to create them a new order.

John was appointed prior in several of the monasteries in Andalusia, but in 1588 after a chapter meeting an opponent of his was appointed Abbot General, and John was left with no office, an insignificant presence living among nuns who, nevertheless, loved and valued him. Part of the ‘conspiracy’ against him was to pack him off to Mexico with another 10 monks, but while in process of selecting them his health gave way and he was clearly unfit to travel.

A very sick man, John was taken into a monastery that was entirely unknown to him under the direction of an abbot whose nose he had put out of joint some years earlier, and who mistreated him, claimed that the house could not afford essential medication, and made his life hell. John forgave him, at which point Abbot Francisco came onside with appropriate expressions of penitence, and John was transferred nearer home, where he died, at last in 1591 aged 49.

It is probably significant that it was during the worst times of John’s life – in prison in Toledo and then confined in a hostile environment towards the end of his life – that he wrote some of his finest and most deeply mystical poetry.

There is a whole collection of his sayings:

‘At the end we shall be examined in love.’

‘Where there is no love, put love, and love will come.’

St John of the Cross is hailed as one of the greatest spiritual writers of all times, and as a Doctor of the Church, but his canonisation took a while.

John is probably most famous for his guidance through ‘The dark night of the soul,’ which has become routinised by pretentious people as signifying deep depression, or even just a difficult phase, but that is not what it is at all. Most of us will, mercifully, never have to experience or worry about it, because it belongs solely to the higher reaches of mysticism to which only a very few of us are ever called. We should be reminded, as Teresa stated, that mysticism is not an essential prerequisite of holiness, neither will it be required of anybody.

For most of us, however, the first chapter of John’s account of ‘The Dark Night’ has a really useful account of some of the traps and snares of the spiritual life, and could be a thoroughly profitable area for self-examination at a time like Advent or Lent. It is written in very clear language and nobody need be afraid of reading or working from it. It deals with aspects of our spiritual journey that can become seriously distracted by the procession of what Christian teaching refers to as ‘The seven deadly sins’ and some of their secondary manifestations.