WHEN THE SAINTS …

9TH of NOVEMBER MARGERY KEMPE

10th of NOVEMBER LEO the GREAT

11th of NOVEMBER MARTIN of TOURS

13th of November CHARLES SIMEON

14th of NOVEMBER SAMUEL SEABURY

**MARGERY KEMPE** [1373-1438] was an absolute one-off.

She was born into a very distinguished family in what is now King’s Lynn – Bishops’ Lynn at the time, when it was the principal port for the Norfolk wool trade, connected to the North German Hanseatic League, with dealings all over Scandinavia and the Baltic. Her father, John Burnham, was a very prosperous merchant and public figure, coroner, mayor five times and MP. She should have been set fair for an uneventful but happy family life, but God had different ideas.

The only reason anybody knows about Margery is that she dictated a book described as the first autobiography in the English language, although it has elements of rhetoric about it, and is to some extent modelled on writings Margery might have known. It has been described by some as ‘a pitch for sainthood,’ with some very intimate confessions. Unsurprisingly, a priest she approached to take it down from her dictation was utterly horrified.

The ‘Book of Margery Kempe’ was completely lost to the public until, in the mid 30’s, it fell out of a cupboard in a country house while guests were searching for a ping-pong ball. The book became an overnight success, with the English adopting Margery as a foil for Joan of Arc, who was roughly contemporary.

Margery married John Kempe, a well-to-do merchant, and their relationship was a loving, tender one that endured all the strain and stress that Margery managed to place on it. Like most women of her social standing she rejoiced in all the trappings of her secure and privileged life; clothes, jewellery and good food.

After the birth of their first child, however, Margery suffered Post Partem Psychosis, a very serious condition, involving excruciating pain, hallucinations, self-harm, and something experienced as possession: she abused John horribly, and had to be restrained for her own safety. She recalls feeling totally lost to herself for more than six months, before she discovered Christ sitting on her bedside; very handsome and dressed in purple silk, and asking: ‘Daughter, why have you forsaken me when I never forsook you?’ This brought her back to her senses. By whatever means psychiatry explains her vision, what happened must be counted a miracle since Margery and John lived on together for the next 15 years and had 13 more children, although she clearly began to take her religion more seriously.

Meanwhile Margery turned her hand to business, clearly not primarily for financial game: first she became a brewer, boasting that her beer was the best in Lynn; and when that business failed she became a miller – strains of Marie-Antoinette! Unlike some of the women we’ve come across who renounced conjugal relations, she seems to have enjoyed that aspect of her life with her husband, but perhaps she felt unduly ashamed of these feelings, because in her anxiety to please God she asked John if they could abstain from sex for the rest of their time together. John procrastinated, but eventually gave in, supposedly on condition that she would pay his debts and dine with him on Friday evenings. John’s response may have been a strategy to procrastinate ‘Yes dear; but not just yet,’ but he conceded. One thinks, perhaps, of the gentle patience of St Joseph:

Margery would never have been able to make all the pilgrimages and journeys that she did without the consent and encouragement of her husband, and after years of travel she returned home when John became seriously disabled after falling downstairs. For two years she looked tended her incontinent husband, consoling herself with the thought that she had once so enjoyed his body that she was now being punished through its agency.

Like many women mystics, Margery remained unsure whether her visions were from God or the opposition, so she experienced Jesus assuring her of his love and her salvation, and instructing her to speak to an anchorite, who, in his turn, affirmed her in her visions. She also famously spent time with Mother Julian of Norwich, whose encouragement can be read by some as being rather oracular, but it seems likely that she would have encouraged Margery to keep going. On one occasion she asked Jesus why he hadn’t bestowed these visions on the ordained clergy, to which his response was that a good deal of sin lurks under holy habits;’ so her mission seemed primarily motivated by the need to reform not only clergy, but the whole world.

By any standards Margery was a well- travelled woman, visiting Jerusalem, Compostela, the Baltic, and many less celebrated pilgrim sites in Europe and England. This would have been unusual enough, but she adopted a very high profile, which divided opinion and sometimes embarrassed John so intensely that on one occasion in Canterbury he made himself scarce, trying to pretend that he didn’t know his wife! He had every excuse.

Weeping – the ‘Gift of tears’ – is not one of the charisms that Paul ever specifically mentions, primarily, perhaps, because he viewed the purpose of gifts of the Spirit as being for the building up and enrichment of the church community. It would be difficult to imagine ‘Lamentations’ of Jeremiah being delivered without tears, given that prophetic utterances as we have them would originally have been ‘performed,’ to an audience, something the church usually fails to make clear. Weeping, of course, is a perfectly natural vehicle for wordlessly expressing deep emotions of repentance and awe for those overwhelmed with the intensity of God’s presence. Like many of the more intense gifts of the Spirit, tongues and prophecy for example, there is scope for serious abuse, both by the subject, those close to them, and individuals higher up in the pecking order who seize on these manifestations, whether authentic or not, to promote whatever cause they may have in mind. The one thing that Paul stresses is that such manifestations by individuals should not be permitted to interfere with the course of a service of worship, and it is unlikely that he would have been best pleased with Margery, dressed conspicuously and waling at the top of her voice.

It should be easy to understand Margery’s need for tears; indeed she prayed for them. If you think about it there is a sense in which no weeping, however intense, would heal the emotional and spiritual scarring after such a devastating mental breakdown: she had evidently been able to function to a fashion during 15 years of family life, but that may not necessarily have served to accomplish total healing, and we simply cannot know or judge how she may have been dealing with what most competent spiritual authorities regarded as her authentic calling from God. Perhaps we could see her attempts at trade and her enjoyment of good food and clothes as in some way shoring up her ego, but once she had understood that God required more of her, she was left to deal with the damage done to herself and others, albeit with God’s mercy, strength and comfort. In such a spiritual condition weeping is inevitable: not to do so would interfere with the process of healing.

On the one hand, then, Margery needed to weep, but on the other, the weeping could have been understood by those around her as proof of her devotion and piety, but we already know from Margery herself that one of her besetting sins was ‘vainglory.’ The fact that she frequently dressed in white, the colour of virginity, when she’d had 14 children created misunderstandings, and her perceived mission to do something about sin in all its manifestations made Margery a somewhat unorthodox travelling companion.

In the early 15th century women were absolutely prohibited from preaching, and Margery claimed that her public exhortations and other outbursts were in no way intended as preaching, but she was often accused of Lollardy, heresy and even witchcraft.

On pilgrimage to Jerusalem her companions became thoroughly exasperated with her: they tormented her’ cut off her dress just below the knee, which was deeply humiliating; when she boarded ship they’d not laid out bedding for her; they set her at the end of their table and ignored her, and possibly took her servant away from her, but the more she was persecuted the more convinced she felt that she was suffering for the sake of God.

There were those, however, who admired her and who trusted her faith and calling. Some of these would pay her to pray for them, and when the Mayor of Leicester had her arrested, calling her ‘strumpet and whore;’ by the time the Bishop was called in Margery was released. The Mayor’s real problem was that, with Margery making a nuisance of herself, and dressed in white, he was afraid of her potentially bad influence on the good wives of Leicester.

The mystery is that we have no idea how Margery ended her life, since her ‘book’ was written while she was still living. We know that she was granted meetings with important senior clergy, and, on one occasion, with the Pope. Despite her solid gold nuisance value, her standing, social, spiritual or perhaps both, was such that church leaders, who didn’t have to put up with her antics any longer than they wished, were convinced that Margery’s calling and visions were perfectly, - or perhaps, like the rest of us, imperfectly – authentic. One might, however, spare a thought or a prayer in charity for husband John, who may well have slipped through the pearly gates and into the saints’ ‘upgrade’ in precedence over his sainted wife!

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**POPE LEO the GREAT** was elected in his absence in 440 and died in 461. He did as much as anybody to establish the office of the Holy See in Rome, both politically and spiritually, and only he and Gregory I ever received the honorific ‘the Great,’ And for good reasons.

We know little of Leo’s early life, not even his date of birth, but his parents were Tuscan, and he was trained as a lawyer. As a deacon under Bishops Celestine and Sixtus he was important enough to be deputed to correspond with Cyril of Alexandria, and to have a treatise by John Cassian on the Incarnation dedicated to him. He was also employed as peacemaker between two generals in Gaul whose quarrels could have endangered the Roman state, such as it was at the time. He was still in Gaul when messengers arrived to inform him that he’d been elected Bishop of Rome.

During the fourth century most of the action in the early church had taken place at the eastern end of the Mediterranean; Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch being the principal and most ancient centres of Christianity, and whilst the see of Rome was respected as the locus of Peter and Paul’s martyrdoms, the vestiges of the old Roman empire were in process of total disintegration during the fifth century, at the hands of ‘Barbarian’ invaders; firstly, in Leo’s papacy, the infamous Huns under their charismatic leader Atilla, and later from the Vandals, who had established themselves in North Africa by the time of Augustine’s death in 430, and now had their eyes on Italy.

It was Leo’s extraordinary courage that impelled him to leave Rome and meet Atilla in person when he was poised to invade, and the civil authorities had been powerless to restrain his forces. Leo managed this feat, possibly with a bribe, but the story is that during the meeting a huge and well-armed warrior stood beside Leo louring over Attila, who was actually quite short. Another reason for Attila’s withdrawal was that it was high summer, and in the north Italian heat plague broke out in his army. Whatever the reason for the withdrawal Leo had effectively saved Rome.

Sometime later it was the Vandals who did finally break through and sack Rome, and on this occasion, though Leo was unsuccessful in saving the city, his diplomacy ensured that churches and other sacred buildings remained untouched although at the end of this 14-day ordeal all the silver had been ripped out of the churches, so that Leo had three huge silver barrels from St Peter’s melted down and to replace it.

At this time, too, there were raging controversies over the nature, or ‘natures’ of Christ. Largely through the machinations of Alexandria and a mob of armed Egyptian monks, in 449 a ‘council’ was held at Ephesus to try to steamroller a decision as to whether Christ had one divine nature which subsumed his humanity, or whether he had two separate natures, one divine and one human. There were two circles to be squared: firstly, if the human Jesus was crucified and died, what about his divinity [?] and secondly, if he was divine how do you account for his death: perhaps he only pretended to die? These discussions were not helped by the various nuances of the Greek language, and various re-formulations of doctrine were suggested and thrown into the ring often as attempts to clarify and define previous ‘errors’ or exaggerations. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, Leo wrote a letter to Bishop Flavian known as ‘the tome of Leo’ offering his own clear and precise formulation:

‘We would not overcome the author of sin and death unless Christ had taken our nature and made it his own, he whom sin could not defile or death imprison….That birth … should not be understood in such a way as to suggest that the distinctive characteristics of our humanity by his process of new creation. For whilst it is true that the Holy Spirit made the virgin fertile, it is equally true that Christ received a real body from her body.

In this way the characteristics of each nature and being were completely preserved in Christ, coming together in his one person. Humility was assumed by majesty, weakness by strength, mortality by eternity; and to pay the debt that we had incurred, an inviolable nature was united to a nature that can suffer. To fulfil the conditions of our inner healing. The man Jesus Christ, one and the same mediator between humankind and God, was able to die in respect of one nature, and unable to die in respect of the other. Thus in the whole and perfect nature of a human being, true God was born, complete in what pertained to his divine nature and complete in what pertained to ours.

By ’ours’ I mean only what the creator formed in us from the beginning which Christ assumed in order to repair. In our saviour there was no trace of those characteristics which the deceiver introduced to humanity, and which we, being deceived, allowed to enter into our common inheritance. Christ did not participate in sin simply because he entered into fellowship with our frailty. He assumed the form of a servant without any trace of sin, thereby enhancing our humanity, but without detracting from his divinity. For the ‘emptying of himself’ whereby the invisible God made himself visible, and the creator and Lord of all willed to become mortal, was a reaching out in compassion, not a failure of power.

Accordingly, he who made humanity, whist remaining in the form of God, was himself made human in the form of a servant. Each nature preserves its own characteristics without diminution. So that the form of a servant does not detract from the form of God.

This formulation was accepted, at Chalcedon, and remains the received doctrine of western churches and of the East, but not, according to Emperor Martian, because Leo proposed it but because it was the formula previously arrived at and accepted by him, which set off another fight, this time about precedence and power.

With Italy falling increasingly into chaos as the result of invasions and threats from all sides, Rome itself, had lost any civil authority it once had, and it was in the 450’s and ‘60’s that the fiction of an emperor was finally put to rest. Leo, however, building on sound foundations laid by his predecessor Innocent at the beginning of the fifth century, was determined to promote and uphold the primacy of the Roman See; in other words it was he who, for the first time, established the papacy as the supreme spiritual authority in Christendom. Much of his correspondence runs like this:

‘Even if [the subject of the disputed sacking] had committed some grave and intolerable misdemeanour, you should have waited for our opinion so as to arrive at no decision for yourself until you knew our pleasure.

Though all priests have a common dignity they have not uniform rank inasmuch as the blessed apostles, notwithstanding the similarity of their honourable estate, there was a certain distinction of power. While the election of them all was equal, yet it was given to one to take the lead of the rest, from which model has arisen a distinction between bishops also. The care of the universal church should converge towards Peter’s one seat, and nothing anywhere should be separated from its head.’

Many of Leo’s letters survive, and a good proportion of them run along similar lines: clearly he was determined to assert the primacy of Rome over the eastern churches, and certainly in his own territory he had justified his claim. In addition he was an able administrator and a charismatic leader, who, like the other ‘great’ pope, Gregory, had a legal training and important experience in civil life that he brought to the Vatican. In fact Leo the Great took on for the first time the ancient Roman title of Pontifex Maximus [the chief priest] and in 445 Leo persuaded the emperor to publish a decree pronouncing ‘Bishop of Rome’ as the official head of the entire Christian Church. In the early church the term Papa had been used of any senior clergyman, so that, in effect, Leo became recognised as the first Pope in the sense that we know the term today.

Leo died in 451, and 130 years later, in 591, the other ‘Great’ Pope Gregory, interestingly enough, with similar legal and administrative background and skill set, consolidated the papacy’s international prestige.

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**MARTIN of TOURS** [316-91] is commonly remembered as the soldier who cut his cloak in half on a winter’s day and wrapped himself in one half giving the other to a nearly naked beggar. The story doesn’t go on to report, as does his biographer, Sulpicius Severus, that onlookers laughed at Martin, who obviously looked rather different from the other soldiers as a consequence of his charity. The other half of the anecdote is that the following night Christ appeared to him in a dream, wearing the cloak, and instructing him to take up his ministry.

He was born in Pannonia, present-day Hungary, his father being an army officer and a pagan. Martin himself joined the army, perhaps as a conscript, because he had long wished to become a Christian, and according to Sulpicius, his friend, was already known for his gentleness and generosity even as soldier and catechumen. As a prototype of the conscientious objector, declined to be paid, because he wished to leave the army. His superior assumed that this was the result of cowardice and had him flung into prison, but not before Martin himself had offered to be placed in the front line without arms at the battle planned for the following day. He got his discharge in 357. It is to this period that belongs the episode with the cloak.

Hilary of Poitiers, another famous saint in the early Gallican Church, returned from exile in 360, and Martin joined him and became a solitary monk at Liguge, on land given by Hilary. Disciples arrived, and Martin remained there until 372, when he was acclaimed Bishop of Tours. Even as bishop, Martin continued to live as a monk, first in a cell attached to his cathedral, and later at another monastery at Marmoutier where as many as 80 other monks settled.

It is really as pioneer monk and abbot that Martin is of historical importance. Sulpicius reports that he was forced to move from the cathedral because of the number of visitors, only a few of whom were probably seeking spiritual guidance, so that chose a spot two miles from the centre of Tours, with a sheer drop on one side and the river on the other, so that only one person at a time could make their way to visit. Here he built a wooden cell, which some of his followers imitated, whilst others lived in caves. They drank no wine unless they were ill; had no possessions in common and usually met outside their cells only for communal prayer. The younger monks did nothing except copy manuscripts, leaving the older ones to pray. All this was a century before Benedict of Nursia, so that Martin must be counted one of the pioneers of western Monasticism.

Martin was a very conscientious bishop, making visitations on foot, on a donkey or even sometimes in a boat. The seminal importance of his work as bishop and missionary is that he did what he could to bring the Gospel into rural areas to ‘Pagans,’ the word originally simply meaning ‘country folk;’ whereas most missionary work had previously been confined to urban centres. For this reason Martin also founded several other monasteries deep in the countryside and worked to demolish heathen centres of worship and sacred trees.

Martin became involved in church controversies, principally with the Priscillians, who were a gnostic sect and predecessors of the Cathars. Priscillus himself was tried in the court of the emperor, for sorcery, as well as heresy, and it was from this civil trial that he was sentenced to death. Martin pleaded in Priscillus’ favour, though not defending his teaching, on the grounds that such issues should be tried by the church rather than by civil courts. When Priscillus was executed – the first application of the death penalty for heresy in the entire history of the church – the sect grew considerably.

In old age Martin had a presentiment of his own death, and when his followers begged him not to leave them, he prayed: ‘Lord If your people still need me I do not refuse to work, but your will be done.’ He died and was buried at Tours on 11th of November.

During his 25 years as Bishop of Tours, Martin gained a reputation as a miracle-worker, supposedly raising a dead man and curing lepers etc, and his cult became one of the most popular of the Middle Ages, with churches all over France, Germany, the Low Countries and England. The biography written by his friend Sulpicius Severus became one of the most popular hagiographies of the Middle Ages, comparable with Athanasius’ biography of St Anthony of Egypt.

His emblem is a burning globe, which was supposedly seen above his head while he was saying Mass, and another is a goose, because their migration took place round about his feast day, as did an occasional spell of fair weather known as St Martin’s summer.

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**CHARLES SIMEON** [1759-1857] was a famous Evangelical preacher celebrated in his time, and whose many sermons are still in print.

He was born in Reading, but once settled at Cambridge University, he became a Fellow and Vicar of Holy Trinity, where there was a good deal of opposition to his appointment, which had been managed through his family. It does seem, however, that by dint of conscientious ministry he brought his punters onside; at any rate, he never left Cambridge for the rest of his life.

As an Evangelical he did a great deal to encourage mission.

There is a handful of these superstar preachers from C19, including some Americans, whose sermons are ageless, for those who are interested.

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**SAMUEL SEABURY** [1729-92] was the first ‘Anglican’ bishop in the U S.

If you read ch20 of Diarmaid MacCulloch’s doorstep simply entitled ‘Christianity, the first 3,000 years’ you may be able to understand why it took nearly 200 years for north America to get its first bishop: most of the early settlers were refugees from the superhigh Stewart Church, although when Cromwell got the upper hand some of these came back to give him a helping hand.

Followers of transactional analysis teach us that ‘The victim becomes the perpetrator.’ Refugees from persecution the early settlers may have been, but uniformity of belief was introduced in most early colonies; fines, expulsions, whippings and hangings persisted, although burnings were confined to witchcraft as we know.

Samuel Seabury was born in Connecticut, studied theology at Yale and medicine at Edinburgh, and was ordained priest by the Bishop of Lincoln in 1753. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel sent him as a missionary to New Brunswick, in New Jersey, followed by livings in the New York area. He served as a chaplain in the British Army during the War of Independence and engaged in pro-British controversies for which he was imprisoned in 1775.

In 1784 Seabury was elected bishop by his fellow ministers, but although he had fought on the British side in the war and been ordained in England, he couldn’t be legally consecrated by English bishops because he was unable to swear allegiance to the King! Negotiations carried on with the Waxworks who ran the English establishment at the time, but eventually Seabury was forced to go to the non-juring bishops in the Church of Scotland, who must have been delighted, in their restrained Scottish mode of expression, to get the opportunity to make a pact that would influence important elements of future American Episcopalian worship and liturgy: Read this ‘Concordat’ in your best subvocal Scottish accent and intonation:

‘The wise and gracious providence of merciful God, having put into the hearts of the Christians of the episcopal persuasion in Connecticut in North America, to desire that the blessings of a free, valid, and purely ecclesiastical episcopacy might be communicated to them, and a church regularly formed in that part of the western world upon the most ancient and primitive model:

And application having been made for this purpose by the Reverend Dr Samuel Seabury, Presbyter in Connecticut, to the Right Reverend the Bishops of the church in Scotland:

The said bishops having taken this proposal into their serious consideration, most heartily concurred to promote and encourage the same, so far as lay in their power; and accordingly, began the pious and good work recommended to them by complying with the request of the clergy in Connecticut and advancing the said Dr Samuel Seabury to the high order of the episcopate: at the same time earnestly praying that this work of the Lord, thus happily begun, might prosper in his hands, till it should please the great and glorious head of the church to increase the number of bishops in America and send forth more labourers into that part of his harvest.

Animated with this pious hope and earnestly desirous to establish a bond of peace and holy communion between the two churches, the bishops of the church in Scotland, whose names are underwritten, having had full and free conference with Bishop Seabury after his consecration an advancement as aforesaid, agreed with him on the following articles, which are to serve as a concordat or a bond of union, between the Catholic remainder of the ancient church in Scotland and the now rising church in the state of Connecticut.

They agree …

Christ as the supreme head and governor, and that under Him the chief ministers or managers of the affairs of this spiritual society are those called bishops, whose exercise of their sacred office being independent of all lay powers, it follows of consequence that their spiritual authority and jurisdiction cannot be affected by any lay deprivation.

They agree that there may be as near a conformity as possible in worship and discipline established between the two churches as is consistent with the different circumstances and customs of nations.

As the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, or administration of the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ is the principal bond of union among Christians, as well as the most solemn act of worship in the Christian Church, the bishops aforesaid agree in desiring that there be as little variance as possible, and though the Scottish Bishops are very far from prescribing to their brethren in this matter, they cannot help ardently wishing that Bishop Seabury will endeavour all he can, consistently with peace and prudence, to make the celebration of this venerable mystery conformable to the most primitive doctrine and practice in that respect, which is the pattern the Episcopal Church of Scotland has copied after in her communion office; and which it has been the wish of some of the most eminent divines of the Church of England, that she also had more closely followed than she seems to have done, she gave up her first reformed liturgy used in the reign of King Edward VI – between which in the form of the Church of Scotland there is no difference in any point which the primitive church reckoned essential to the right ministration of the Holy Eucharist.

Here's a neat piece of footwork: Scotland 6 and most English players red-carded and sent off!!!

Seabury proved an excellent bishop; an able organiser and administrator whose major influence on American church history is celebrated on this day every year.