**WHEN THE SAINTS…**

11TH OF JANUARY MARY SLESSOR

12TH OF JANUARY AELRED OF RIEVAULX

12TH OF JANUARY BENEDICT BISCOP

13TH OF JANUARY HILARY OF POITIERS

13TH OF JANUARY GEORGE FOX

MARY SLESSOR [1848-1915] was an extraordinarily down-to-earth missionary to Calabar, an area in present-day Nigeria consisting of swamps, crocodile-infested rivers and an environment so unhealthy to Europeans that shipping lines never sold return tickets.

She was born in Aberdeen, to a drunken father whose violent behaviour trained her for dealing with similarly indisposed Africans when she encountered them in later life. When her father died Mary was left, at the age of 12, to support her mother and two younger sisters, her brother John, who was destined for mission, having also died. Until the age of 30 when she was finally accepted as a teacher for the Presbyterian Mission, Mary worked 12 hours a day in the mills, attending evening classes and seeing her two younger sisters into gainful employment.

The family were church-going Presbyterians, and used to play at missionaries, preaching to their toys. Once Mary felt she had fulfilled her responsibilities to the family she was accepted by the Missionary Society as a teacher; trained ‘bookishly’ and quite inadequately for three months and sent out in 1878 at a salary of £60 a year, most of which she sent home. She learned Efik, the lingua franca very quickly and found acceptance among the Africans to whom she ministered with medicine, teaching practical skills about the house, and making friends with the local chiefs. The European lifestyle of the mission irked her, and in order to save money she came to eat the local food and eventually lived in a hut built according to vernacular architecture.

Reading between the lines of Richard Symons’ article on Mary, it seems clear that she was unlikely to have fitted in with the coastal mission HQ, who must have been content enough to release her to work further into the interior, where British colonial writ hardly ran at all, and nobody had encountered a white woman: on her arrival she was poked prodded and treated with curiosity, but rapidly established herself among the chiefs and particularly the women.

On first arriving in Africa, Mary felt discouraged by her situation among a people whom she described in a letter as ‘Degraded,’ and with very good reason. The coastal people had been corrupted with chiefs trading slaves for alcohol, guns and brass sticks that passed for currency. Women were virtually enslaved, and subject to insult and exploitation if they had no man to defend them: children were sacrificed; twins murdered and their mothers made outcast because it was believed that the second child must have resulted from intercourse with the Devil. Once she made it into the interior however, Mary discovered the fundamental decency of the people, and maintained that they were, indeed, religious, for all that aspects of their culture caused them fear and suffering. Because she was virtually untaught in theology she had no difficulty adapting her teaching to the needs of those she served.

In time her reputation grew, and as British influence increased in the interior, a dozen young men were sent out as district commissioners. Mary won the respect of a governor-general who was a fellow Scot with a Cambridge degree in theology and anthropology, who appointed her as magistrate because she warned him that a ‘big white chief’ wishing to impose new laws would be quite unacceptable. She presided at local courts with three chiefs, and sometimes either knitting or with a small child on her knee. Her administration of justice was eccentric to say the least: cases were usually concerned with land, debts and the theft of wives, and Mary had the facility to mediate efficiently by explaining to each side the position of the other. On one occasion she beat a chief over the head with her umbrella for lying!

When visitors arrived she addressed them all as ‘laddie,’ regardless of rank, and entertained them with extreme informality, once welcoming a governor-general from the roof of her hut, clad only in a chemise. It seems clear that Mary won friends and influenced practically everybody with her complete lack of ceremony, though there were always a few doubters, bearing in mind the class difference between herself and your average colonial administrator. She was also very keen that as many Africans as possible should be trained up to do the missionary work.

Mary often felt alone, and being a teacher rather than a minister, she missed the sacraments and spiritual counsel, not to mention that she must have needed the kind of ‘supervision’ that is taken for granted nowadays among those with her responsibilities, for all that even today such essential support is often either inadequate or even non-existent for people whose work places them under serious emotional strain. Mary read the bible three times a day, and prayed, having developed a practical humility that should be the aspiration of many ministers today. She wrote in her bible: ‘Blessed are those who serve God in the second rank.’

Her faith was as adaptable and as resilient as her personality:

‘All work for others is first of all discipline for ourselves. God cannot give success in our best aspirations because we cannot bear it … God will work out the purpose by another way through, so with him there is no waste, because no desire or prayer is ever lost.’

Mary took responsibility for many abandoned children, including twins, and among other things, she built a sanctuary for women. The missionary society refused to fund this, so she forswore her furlough and used the money that would have been spent to fund her project.

Throughout her last years Mary suffered very poor health: she had walked barefoot, drunk unboiled water and taken virtually no precautions for her own wellbeing, but when she died thousands of people attended her funeral.

Many people in Mary’s time were wary of missionaries, partly, of course, because they were not always happy about many colonial policies and their affects. Nowadays there is more sensitivity about colonial history and neo-colonial policies as pursued in Africa by Europeans, and particularly the French, and the more we meditate on the workings of our own policies and culture in ‘the west,’ the more reservations we need to have about imposing whatever values we think our governments and churches adhere to upon developing polities that Europeans have taken a heavy hand in exploiting and mismanaging. On the other hand, nobody, and certainly no Christian, could possibly argue that Sensitivities about ‘Cultural imperialism’ are not trumped by the necessity to eradicate universally deplorable practices such as child sacrifice and the virtual enslavement of women. What seems abundantly evident is that Mary, and people like her, provide the best hope for navigating what seems to be an ever-widening gulf between the two objectives.

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HILARY of POITIERS [c315-67] was styled by Augustine and Jerome ‘The Athanasius of the West’ because of his clear-minded stand against Arianism.

By the fourth century the western church had fallen well behind the eastern in terms of bible study and speculative theology, with Tertullian and Cyprian in North Africa, and Novation in Rome the only creative leaders, although we remember Irenaeus of Lyons in the middle and late second century. To place him historical perspective, he preceded Augustine and Jerome, and Martin of Tours, whom Hilary ordained during the mid-350’s, succeeded him as Bishop of Tours. As well as being contemporary with the Great Athanasius, he also exerted some influence on Ambrose by writing some quite theological hymns.

Hilary was born in Poitiers of noble parents who were pagan and obtained for him the best education in grammar and rhetoric, probably in Bordeaux, so that he was familiar with both Latin and Greek, and became a public orator. He married and was the father of a daughter Afra. From his own account of his conversion it appears that Hilary’s was an adult decision, of which he gives an account of what seems to have been a largely intellectual and philosophical process in his writings, which predate Augustine’s ‘Confessions,’ although they concentrate more on his faith than on his ethical journey.

‘When I began to search for the meaning of life I was at first attracted by the pursuit of wealth and leisure: as most people discover there is little satisfaction in such things, and a life orientated to gratification and greed or killing time is unworthy of our humanity. We have been given life in order to achieve something worthwhile; to make good use of our talents, for life itself points us to eternity: how otherwise could one regard as a gift from God this life, which is painful, fraught with anxiety, starts in infancy with a blank mind and ends in the rambling conversation of the old. It is my belief that human beings, prompted by our very nature, have always sought to raise our sites through the teaching and practice of the virtues such as patience, chastity and forgiveness in the conviction that a good life is secured only through good deeds and good thoughts. [So far this is pure classics.] ‘Could the immortal god have given us life with no other horizon than death? Could the giver of good inspire us with a sense of life only to have it overshadowed by the fear of death?

‘Thus I sought to know the God and father who has given us this great gift of life to whom I felt I owed my existence in whose service was honour, on whom my hopes were fixed. I was inflamed by a passionate desire to apprehend or know this god … Most people admit that god exists but feel that he is ignorant or indifferent to the lot of humanity. I was reflecting on these various ideas when I chanced upon the books that according to Jewish tradition were written by Moses and the prophets. In them I discovered that God the creator bears witness to himself in these words: ‘I am who I am…’ I was amazed at the perfection of this insight which put into intelligent language the incomprehensible knowledge of God. Nothing better suggests God as ‘being.’ The God who ‘is’ can have neither end nor beginning.’

He was baptised by Maximus at the age of 30 in Trier, where he may have spent some two years either as an official or a businessman.

Around 350 the people of Poitiers elected Hilary as their bishop, but soon afterwards, at a pro-Arian synod in Milan in 353, the Gallic bishops, who recognised Hilary as their leader, were all exiled for having failed to condemn Athanasius and his trinitarian – Nicene - theology. Tactically this proved a serious error on the part of Constantius II, because once in Phrygia from about 356-60, Hilary did not suffer close confinement and was left free to study and hone his often combative style of argument expressed to perfection in his work against Arians.

By the autumn of 361 Hilary was back in Poitiers, ready to head up the synod of Luteria, described as the ‘nucleus of modern Paris,’ and in the teeth of opposition from the new Emperor Julian ’The Apostate, whose policy was to face off the Arians and orthodox so that they would cancel each other out, Hilary managed to swing the whole Gallican episcopacy behind the Nicene theological position. It is acknowledged by many scholars that Hilary’s clear-eyed statements of dogma are even more effective than those of Athanasius.

Hilary also founded the monastery of Liguge, near Poitiers, with Martin of Tours as its first abbot. The foundation of monasticism in this area is very much associated with stories of Hilary’s zeal and miracles, and was widely reputed for his kindness and gentleness, and known as the friend of all.

Hilary seems to appear on the western scene from nowhere to help adapt orthodox Christian theology and ethics to the requirements of western culture, learning somewhat from the Africans, including the apologetic writings of Lactantius. It is in the prologue to his expanded treatise on the Trinity that he recounts the intellectual and spiritual processes of his conversion:

Bernard McGinn writes of Hilary:

‘a mediator between the Greek and the Latin west in the Roman empire, Hilary focussed on Christology and ethics in his pioneering contribution to western spirituality. He delivered to the churches in Gaul, Italy and Spain a spiritual message that combines solid doctrinal enquiry with a fervent reading of scripture and a very responsible sense of the moral concerns of his society.’

On the other hand, R R Southern, author of the Early Church volume of the Penguin History of Christianity, notes that Hilary was rather tight-lipped on the subject of the Holy Spirit.

As well as his work on the Trinity, Hilary also wrote extensively on the Psalms, and against Arianism. As well as the collection of hymns already mentioned, he wrote a commentary on Matthew, and another treatise on ‘The Mysteries.’ Some of his hymns were still being sung in Toledo as late as the seventh century.

Jerome described Hilary as ‘The trumpet of the Latins against the Arians.’

Hilary’s feast day traditionally begins the term in the law courts and universities known as ‘the Hilary term.’

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AELRED of RIEVAULX [1110-67] was a very influential Cistercian abbot, whose pastoral concerns become evident from his own writings and from the biography written by Walter Daniel that illustrates the efficacy of his work on ‘spiritual friendship.’

He was educated in the monastic school in Durham and took work in the court of King David of Scotland in charge of his household.

Bernard of Clairvaux set up a Cistercian foundation at Rievaulx in North Yorkshire in 1132, which Aelred joined two years later [1134]: his organisational and political skills would have come in useful to the new foundation. He became novice master in 1142, shortly after having travelled to Rome on church business. A year later, in 1143, he became abbot of a small daughter house in Revesby, still in Yorkshire.

In 1147 Aelred became abbot of Rievaulx itself. The impressive ruins can still be visited and Rievaulx became the largest monastic foundation in England, with 150 choir monks and 500 lay brothers. As well as cure of souls, the monastery ran a large sheep farm; grew flax and had its own foundry and tannery. These huge Cistercian foundations, however, came, in time, to be generally resented as exploitative and too powerful in the land, but Aelred’s abbacy stands at their early phase, and he is notable for having considerably mitigated the very harsh regime that Bernard had envisaged for his own original houses in France. Aelred himself set up five more monasteries in Scotland and the north.

Aelred’s treatise on spiritual friendship was a landmark performance, written, as it was, in the form of a dialogue, among Aelred himself and two brothers, Walter – probably Walter Daniel, his spiritual son, and another monk named Gratian, who seems to be there as a makeweight. Aelred studied Cicero’s ‘Amicitia’ which would have been on the curriculum of any mediaeval school, but as a Christian he went back to Augustine, whose somewhat informal fellowship of like-minded friends he set up in his home with Monica, his mother. During the middle ages this ‘Augustine’ model of monasticism was second only to the Benedictine order in the west.

The question is: ‘What’s the distinction between spiritual friendship and the best friendships we already enjoy?’ Remember Aelred is writing for monks in a very arduous enclosed community where people could seriously get on one another’s nerves, even, as Walter sites in Aelred’s biography, to the point of murderous rage and madness. It is an error to think of monastic life as a kind of serene refuge from the world: corporal punishment was an everyday practice and people who entered monasteries did so and were accepted for a number of reasons that may have had little enough to do with vocation or the love of God. A good exercise in sympathetic understanding would be to read the Browning poem on monastic life, which starts: ‘Grrrrrrrrrrrrr!’ this said, there were some very holy and conscientious abbots such as Aelred who did their best to run ‘a happy ship.’

If you recall, the rule of Benedict frowned on special friendships among religious, and for the same reasons that sexual liaisons were forbidden in the armed forces: ‘All for one and one for all.’ Aelred is far more humane and realistic: better to let them develop openly than in secret. He writes:

‘What happiness, what security, what joy to have someone to whom you dare to speak on terms of equality as to another self; one to whom you need have no fear to confess your failings; one to whom you can unblushingly make known progress you have made in the spiritual life; one to whom you can entrust all the secrets of your heart and before whom you can place all your plans! What, therefore, is more pleasant than so to unite to oneself the spirit of another and of two to form one, that no boasting is thereafter to be feared, no suspicion to be dreaded, no correction of one by the other to cause pain, no praise on the part of one to bring a charge of adulation from the other …

Friendship is a stage bordering upon perfection which consists in the love and knowledge of God, so that from being a friend of our neighbour’s, we become the friend of God, according to the words of the saviour in the Gospel: ‘I will not now call you servants, but my friends.’

In response to such high-minded aspirations expressed in the dialogue by Aelred, Walter replies:

‘Friendship such as that is so sublime and perfect that I don’t dare aspire to it. The kind of friendship described by your favourite Augustine is good enough for me and Gratian here: “To talk and laugh and to do each other kindnesses’ to read and discuss books together; to pass from lightest jesting to talk of the deepest things and back again; to differ without rancour, as a man might differ from himself. And when, most rarely, dissention arose, to find our normal agreement all the sweeter for it; to teach each other and to learn from each other; to be impatient for the return of the absent and to welcome them with joy on their homecoming; these and suchlike things, proceeding from our hearts as we gave affection and received it back, and shown by face, voice, eyes and by a thousand other pleasing ways, kindled a flame which fused our souls together, and made, of many, one.’ This is one idea of friendship, and our conscience would prick us if we did not love where we are loved again, or return the love of those who love us.’

To this Aelred responds:

‘Such friendship is not of the Spirit; it is characteristic of young men, young as were once Augustine and the friend of whom he was speaking there, however, provided no element of impropriety creeps in, we may tolerate it [idle talk and lies excepted] in the hope of richer grace, since it may form the basis of a more holy friendship. From such foundations, as devotion grows hand in hand with zeal for spiritual studies, as age brings gravity, and as spiritual faculties are enlightened and the heart purged of dross, a man may take the next close step to higher things, just as it is easier to pass, on account of a certain analogy between the two, from human friendship to that of God himself.’

Last month we looked at St Francis de Sales in relation to Jane, and he comes up in his own right next month. He speaks of the distinction between what he terms ‘ordinary goodness’ and devotion: perhaps the distinction between Walter’s – Augustine’s - definition of friendship and Aelred’s ‘spiritual’ friendship can be seen as parallels: remember that Aelred is writing for Cistercian monks.

At all events very few people would regard Cicero’s original four classes of friendship as covering the whole spectrum, and enough work has been done in the social sciences to enable us to understand that the way we become attracted to others as friends may not take account of unconscious motives, so that some of Aelred’s caution should not be thrown out with the bathwater. Neither, as he wisely observes, should we treat a friend - or be treated – like an ox, simply thinking of its use to us.

Aelred writes of four stages of spiritual friendship: choosing, testing, fostering and enjoying, and he is very realistic about the pains of a ruptured friendship, particularly when both parties remain in the community and need to deal with the wounds to their emotions and reputations.

It is understandable that in a church fellowship, people may be wary of confiding in a leader unless [s]he is well loved and trusted, and Aelred’s four stages may well apply in such cases. Many people entering a church community, as well as familiar members, still live in fear of being judged and therefore often withhold their confidences, but people in 12-step recovery fellowships understand that with growing maturity comes an awareness of when and where ego boundaries may be under threat, and the necessity of caution in choosing ‘sponsors’ to whom they will confide the ups and downs of their entire lives to fellow if they truly wish to free themselves as best they can from the past.

In all groups, and particularly in spiritual fellowships of every kind gossip is a very serious danger to growth and recovery. Leaders cannot be everywhere and do everything, so ultimately it is up to each of us to exercise responsibility in listening to and sharing ourselves with others, but that is probably a very considerable part of the love that Jesus enjoins on each and everyone of us.

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BENEDICT BISCOP [628-89] was a nobleman, like Wilfrid, and probably a member of the Northumbrian royal family. After service as a thane at the court of King Oswy, at the age of about 25 when Wilfrid was around 19, the two left for Rome together, but parted company at Lyons, where Wilfrid stayed with the bishop. At Rome Biscop was very impressed with the grandeur and worship, and on his way back stopped off for two years at Lerins, the famous Benedictine foundation on the southern coast of France, which was in process of changing from a collection of individual hermit cells to a community. We are not sure what he did next, but it seems likely that he spent time in other Frankish monasteries, because on his deathbed he told his monks that he had visited 17 in all.

The next we know of Biscop is that, in Rome once again, he was chosen to accompany the new Archbishop of Canterbury back to England. This was in 667, and the newe man was Theodore of Tarsus, who had been brought up Orthodox, but took up the Roman rite. The pope had originally wanted Theodore’s friend Hadrian for the job, but Hadrian had objected that he was too old, and recommended his friend. Sources seem to differ as to what happened next.

Over the course of a year Biscop and Theodore made their way to Canterbury, but whether Hadrian came with them seems uncertain. Hadrian had been chosen as abbot for the monastery of St Peter & Paul, which became St Augustine’s Canterbury, but in the meantime Theodore appointed Biscop apparently as a stop-gap, and he was there for two years, and evidently distinguished himself.

Biscop accompanied King Elfreth’s son Aldfrith to Rome, at which point the Pope awarded him a licence to found his own monastery without the usual connection to local nobility or church; in other words, with an entirely free hand. At the same time Theodore was having difficulties with Wilfrid, and moved to deprive him of his See of York, but lost on appeal. Biscop missed the synod of Whitby in 667, and all the bitterness and acrimony attendant on the English church forsaking the Celtic rite and moving to the Roman. In all Biscop made six journeys to Rome, and by his influence and agency his co-operation with Theodore proved crucial in making the transition.

On his return from Rome King Ecgfrith gifted Biscop 70 hides of land at the mouth of the weir which he was free to own and live off in style, but he chose to use it to fund his monastic foundations; there were two, one at Wearmouth and the other six miles away at Jarrow, and if these sound familiar it is because in time a seven-year-old oblate named Bede was given to the abbot’s care in 683.

Biscop is primarily to be credited for the internationally renowned seat of learning in Northumbria, having brought over books and manuscripts galore, vestments, vessels and religious art. Gregory the Great had maintained that art would teach the illiterate, and in his new chapel Biscop had themed pictures placed on each wall. He also brought over from Rome St John Cantor, whose familiarity with chant leant the houses additional prestige. He had masons and other craftsmen brought over from France, whose work he probably knew, and had his buildings erected in stone as opposed to wood, and with glass windows, which was absolutely state of the art. Janina Ramirez in her book on Anglo-Saxon bigwigs states that the two houses would have struck the onlooker with wonder much as the Gherkin has in London in our time.

Biscop was familiar, too, with all the rules and practices of Frankish monasteries, including the principal, the Benedictine, and on his deathbed he told his monks that it was not he but God who had given them all these good things, and willed that the library should not be broken up.

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GEORGE FOX [1624-91] is often regarded as the one and only founder of the Quaker movement, and commentators are eager to point out that, owing to the popularity of Fox’s journal, Quaker historians have had to work hard to bring other figures in the movement to public attention.

George came from a puritan family: his father was known as ‘Righteous Christer,’ and his mother was reputed to be ‘of the stock of the martyrs.’ George was taught to read his bible, and was noted as a child, for ‘gravity and staidness of spirit.’ There was talk of making the boy a priest, but his father was a weaver and George was apprenticed to a neighbour who dealt in candle and wool, with a side line in shoe-making, so it was as a cobbler that George was contracted to learn.

When he was 21 he tells his readers: ‘At the command of God I brake off all familiarity or fellowship with young or old.’ After travelling for a while aimlessly he made his way to London where he was keen to speak with clergy, but he was very unimpressed: ‘Being bred up in Oxford and Cambridge does not make a man a minister of Christ, and God does not dwell in temples made with hands.’ One of them instructed him to take tobacco; another to sing Psalms! He wandered round the peak district of Derbyshire asking questions of the priests, but became ever more disenchanted with them.

In 1647 he attended a Baptist meeting in Mansfield and he recounts that the Lord opened his mouth and that he ‘saw the light and all was manifest.’ He continues: ‘As a young man I’d had a discerning spirit,’ He began to ‘preach with power, and people came from far and near…’ In the midst of the hubbub of differing sects in the early days of puritan ascendancy, George and his ‘Friends of Truth,’ as they called themselves, developed their own belief system, but at the time they were only one among many contending voices that Cromwell eventually found it necessary to supress.

They were opposed to any institutional structure for religion – churches, priests, all formal liturgy, and they refused to pay tithes, to swear oaths, to recognise titles or honours, or to bear arms. They would not doff their hats to gentry, clergy or magistrates; and being taken from church to court for interrupting services in ‘steeple houses,’ they kept their hats on in court and refused to read the oath.

They rejected any form of sacramental worship, because they contended that eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of the death of Christ had little or nothing to do with the actual experience of Christ in the heart, which they insisted to be the mark of a true Christian. They were uninterested in any form of ritual, including that for the dead. They maintained that God exists in the heart of everybody, good and evil alike, so that the puritan doctrine of double predestination was entirely mistaken. Their criterion for a true Christian was whether the individual sought the inner Christ, and admitted that there are people who, through their own folly and wrongdoing, remain the property of Satan.

In Lichfield, Fox recalls marching through the streets crying: ‘woe to the bloody city of Lichfield,’ and at Beverley Steeple House he shouted to the preacher: ‘come down thou deceiver!’ because the preacher had promised his congregation ‘the water of life free,’ but charged £300 a year in tithes for it!!!

They were charged with blasphemy, sedition and riot, and other offences, but never became of any great concern to the government because they were no threat. George met Cromwell in 1655 while he was in the Marshalsea Prison, and by the time he’d finished speaking Cromwell was in tears and saw to his release. It was, in fact, very largely in reaction to what Fox regarded as the tyranny of the Presbyterians that he and his followers developed his ideas.

One of the reasons that the movement survived the tumult of mid-century religious diversity was that George Fox had enormous organisational skills: there were regular meetings among the Quaker fellowship groups all over the country. George travelled extensively as did many of his followers: Quaker groups started up in America, the West Indies, the Netherlands, Scandinavia and Germany and he got to visit them all. Their spread seems to have taken place predominantly in rural areas, but in parts of the world other than England the Friends found themselves freer to believe and worship as they wished. In England they were regularly attacked by ’men with pitchforks, flails and staffs,’ and with the religious settlement of 1662 things got much worse and they suffered very badly in the lower courts.

In 1688 the Stewart dynasty came to its inglorious end, and with the Toleration Act of 1689 persecution, at least by the law of the land, ceased for good although there was still conflict over tithing.

George died in 1691 and his journal became an inspiration to a new generation. Since his death Quakers have continued to earn universal respect for their integrity, and Gerald Priestland, the late great religious correspondent of the BBC, in his book and series ‘Priestland’s Progress,’ investigating Christianity generally, found that, in his view, the Quakers were the only group within the whole of Christianity who were continuing to practise anything like Christ’s original teaching.

There is a brief survey of Quaker history, belief and practice ‘Quaker by Convincement,’ written by a practising Quaker, which gives a very honest, warts-and-all assessment of life as a Friend, which is also well worth reading.

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