WHEN THE SAINTS …

17TH MARCH PATRICK

18TH MARCH CYRIL of JERUSALEM

19TH MARCH JOSEPH of NAZARETH

20TH MARCH CUTHBERT

PATRICK [D 400?] – We know little enough of Patrick’s origins: he was of Romano-British stock; his father owned a landed estate, and was a deacon, and his grandfather a priest. He seems to have come from somewhere in the west, either Wales or further north.

Before he was 16 he was captured and taken into slavery in Armagh, and prayed incessantly for the six years of his enslavement looking after animals on a northern Irish hillside, before making his escape. On his return home his family begged him to stay but he had received a vision that he should go back to Armagh and preach to the pagans. It is likely that he was priested somewhere in Gaul, but later consecrated as Bishop of Armagh, but we have no further details.

Patrick came to Ireland in the company of a few followers, whom he melded into a prayer group, or ‘family,’ as he called them. He states that he baptised thousands of people, and he set up a school for clergy and himself ordained a number of Irish priests. His modus operandi seems to have been to create local structures for an infant church, and, once established, he would move on somewhere else. He is venerated and celebrated as Patron Saint of Ireland.

Patrick wrote a ‘Confession,’ and possibly the opening verses of his famous Breast Plate, to which others added later. In his confession he admits that he was sinful and unlearned, but he clearly had the rudiments of the faith by which he was able to convince and transform his hearers; but it seems more likely that what achieved his striking success was his own personality and the faith that others witnessed in him: unlike the later Anglo-Saxon way of going straight to the ruler and making conversions that would ‘trickle down,’ Patrick attracted crowds of ordinary people as did Jesus and Cuthbert three centuries later.

As ever, many legends have grown up around Patrick; of miracles worked in his lifetime and afterwards, but Kathleen Jones warns that Patrick was by no means the only saint to evangelise the Irish.

In time Columba brought the Celtic Christianity to what is present-day Scotland, and from there, largely by the agency of Aidan, this version of the faith came to Northumbria.

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CYRIL of JERUSALEM [315-86] – Cyril is probably best known nowadays for his ‘Catechetical lectures,’ given throughout Lent to the faithful who were ‘called, without yet receiving grace’ and awaiting their first communion at Easter. Reading them – and there are 23 of them; moderately long – it is possible to learn a little about church practice in the 4th century, for instance, that men and women were separated in case of temptation, and that women were encouraged to read quietly, which tells us a little about the standard of their education.

In these lectures it is possible to discern the outworking of Cyril’s own desperate struggles with heresy, mainly of the Arian variety, although it never seems to occur either to him or others attempting to uphold orthodoxy that it may have been possible for good and faithful people to hold different beliefs, even if they were mistaken. He encourages his flock to hate heretics for their impiety; belief matters to God: apparently if you are living a good and virtuous life but believe mistaken doctrine God will not receive you!!! Heretics apparently believe mistakenly BECAUSE they are bad people!!!

Cyril was born in Jerusalem and would have been 12 years old when Helena, the mother of Constantine the great, visited in order to discover the sacred sites, and the ‘true’ cross. He was educated well by monks; ordained priest and consecrated Bishop of Jerusalem in 350.

From the evidence of the Catechetical Lectures it is clear that he was a conscientious bishop, but of the 35 years he served, he spent 16 in exile, having been deposed and called back for reinstatement three times. Arians insisted that his consecration was irregular, but the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople of 381 declared him ‘Bishop of the mother of all churches.’ His Metropolitan, Acacius of Caesarea, accused him of insubordination and of using church funds to feed the poor during a famine[!]

Although Arianism was anathematised at the Council of Nicea in 325, there were still Arians in high ecclesiastical places; a situation that continued into the sixth century. If his lectures show him encouraging his catechumens to ‘hate heretics ‘rather than heresy, perhaps all these struggles in his personal and church life put this into some perspective.

At all events, Cyril upheld the faith under very trying conditions and at great personal cost, and he is also credited with having introduced the liturgy for Holy week, which is still in place both in the Eastern and Western churches.

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JOSEPH of NAZARETH – The truth is that we know practically nothing about Joseph’s life. Amid a number of perfectly respectable biblical scholars and theologians who, like Dr Elaine Storkey, ‘would not go to the stake for the virgin birth’ how Joseph fits into the already less than reliable infancy narratives is a puzzle. By the time of the crucifixion Mary, Jesus’ mother, is entrusted to the care of the beloved disciple, so we are to assume that by this time she was a widow.

A very careful reading of the Gospels make it clear that Jesus’ relationship with his mother may not have been an easy one, although, naturally, this did not involve any failure of love, respect or duty on either side. It is easy, when reading Jesus’ attitude to family ties in relation to becoming fully his disciple, to read into this that relations may have been far more damaged than they probably were. On the other hand it is difficult to take Jesus’ seriously as a role model, sharing the human condition, if, as the Catholic psychiatrist Dr Jack Dominion argues, Jesus upbringing was one of exemplary human development when one of its prime elements is surviving the rough and tumble of normal family life.

And what is normal family life? You may have come across ‘Families and how to survive them’ in the 80’s, but far less likely that you may have held in your hand – let alone read – a very thin publication entitled: ‘Functional families.’ To suggest that Jesus survived the ups and downs of close family life is simply to assign him the credit of having lived life much as the rest of us, in which case we can probably assume that his relationship with Joseph also had its moments: how else would he have been able to stand up to his enemies and exercise self-control?

Be all this as it may, Joseph would have seen to Jesus’ earthly upbringing to the best of his ability, and we are to assume that he protected his wife and son, taught Jesus a trade, and, most importantly of all, it was by his agency that Jesus could be grounded in what we call real life so that he grew up among humans without his super-ego working overtime like his cousin and mentor the Baptist, and with an ability to meet other human beings of whatever condition, with a level gaze.

By the time Jesus entered ministry he clearly knew how to enjoy himself; how to make friends and influence people, and how to attract and hold a crowd. He also knew how to love and give of himself as a friend and minister, and, again, reading the Gospels carefully, he also loved life and felt pain, grief and fear like the rest of us: like the rest of us, too, the rough and tumble of family life would have enabled him to understand, live with and forgive deeply flawed human beings who were frequently wrong, hurtful or just seemed to be ‘on another planet.’ Much of this positive regard for the people and society around him – itself a gift from God – would have been mediated through his relationship with his father.

So, once again, let us discard the myths, legends and holy hokum and try to see Joseph and the many good gifts he bestowed on Jesus, or, to be theological and faithful, the good gifts God bestowed on Jesus by the instrumentality of Joseph his earthly father, and acknowledge the vitally important trust God placed in him that he can be understood to have lived up to and fulfilled the best way he knew how.

Joseph is rightly honoured as the Patron Saint of the Father of the Family, and of those who work with their hands.

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CUTHBERT [635-87] – Cuthbert is the best-known and best-loved Anglo-Saxon saint; not just in Northumbria, but in the whole of England: his shrine was the most popular pilgrimage site before Thomas a Becket.

Cuthbert came from a noble family: he arrived at Melrose Abbey on horseback, accompanied by a servant, which already marks him out as an aristocrat. It is even possible that he had already served in the military in some capacity or other, as recounted by an anonymous biographer, before deciding to dedicate his life to ‘the army of God,’ and we read of him guarding sheep on the Northumbrian hills, not, perhaps, so much as a humble shepherd, but as a retainer guarding his king’s sheep from rustlers. He was converted to Celtic Christianity by Aidan, and whatever his back story he presented himself at Melrose in order to become a monk probably around 651.

With Melrose as his base Cuthbert travelled through the whole of Northumbria, which in Anglo-Saxon times included a good deal of southern Scotland. The area was wild and many of the villages he visited were inaccessible, ‘far away; on steep and rugged mountains, which others dreaded to visit;’ but he preached, healed and ministered to the poor and sick, often staying away for weeks; clearly, having worked as a shepherd, he was conversant with countryside of this type.

In 661 Abbot Eata, who had jurisdiction over both Melrose and Lindisfarne, sent him to Ripon, where he met Wilfrid, and it seems likely that Cuthbert conceded that the days of the Celtic Rite in England were numbered: after the synod of Whitby in 664, Eata appointed him Prior at Lindisfarne, with a view to facilitating the monks into the Latin Rite; and Although Cuthbert persuaded them to change their tonsure from the front to the top of the head, and to accept the agreed date for Easter, he was, above all, concerned for uniting the two traditions, and seems to have felt that the debates were more about externals than what actually mattered in the faith.

In time Cuthbert felt the [very Celtic] call to solitude; first at the end of the island, and later, when this hermitage became too accessible to visitors, at ‘Inner Farne, where he built a shelter and attempted to grow wheat without success, but grew barley the next year, and lived on barley bread and water. He did, however, build a small shelter for those guests brave enough to visit him.

Cuthbert was already widely known for his holiness and asceticism, and it is told that a sceptical monk kept watch one night, only to see Cuthbert wade into the freezing sea up to his waste, singing psalms and praying the whole night. When he emerged a pair of sea-otters followed him ashore and warmed his feet with their fur and their breath.

Such was his reputation for holiness and devotion that in 685 he was persuaded, very much against his own will, to become Bishop of Lindisfarne: it is stated that he left his hermitage in tears. As bishop his management style was unique: he was kindly and gentle, but ‘afire with love,’ according to Bede: whenever there was friction he would get up and leave the room; spend the interim in deep prayer and return when he had been informed that a consensus had been reached; and calmly recommenced where he had left off.

He never relished or enjoyed anything to do with being a bishop, and for the last year of his life, understanding that he had contracted a mortal illness, resigned his office and returned to the Inner Farne, where, according to records, all he could see from his shelter were sea birds and the open sky and it was here that he died on 20th of March 687, at the age of 53, the moment of his death being signalled to his monks on Lindisfarne by the waving of torches from the clifftops.

The Lindisfarne Gospels were written in Cuthbert’s honour: after his death an entire industry of his relics and memorabilia began, and even now in the North East, in tribute to his love of nature, the Ida ducks are known affectionately as ‘Cuddy ducks.’

Cuthbert and Wilfrid, his contemporary, represent the two opposing poles of Anglo-Saxon Christianity; Cuthbert the holy, irenic and ascetic friend of the common people, and Wilfrid a ‘prince of the Roman church’; an ambitious man with an agenda who quarrelled with practically everybody; the former the Celtic, Columban northern tradition, and the latter the southern Augustinian and centralising way. It is only comparatively recently that a neo-Celtic way of Christianity has been devised and spread; a structure built over, rather than based on the very little that remains of the original.

The differences between Celtic and Roman Christianity were not just about the date of Easter, though that would have been sufficient to have caused considerable inconvenience, with differing Lents, and dates for Ascension and Pentecost, though Christmas was held in common; and it was not simply tonsuring – the monastic styles of haircut, that differentiated Celtic and Roman monastic spirituality. Ultimately the real issue was probably about the role of bishops in the two churches, and it was here that the Roman ascendancy counted.

The Roman party were evangelists, organisers and builders, in every sense of the word, whereas Celtic monks were likely to be far more dedicated to holiness of life; long fasting, asceticism and poverty, although in many instances kings and nobles, be they Latin or Celtic Christians, fought and killed one another in a manner that hardly differentiated them from their pagan neighbours. Roman Christians brought structure, order and permanence to the English church, particularly under the auspices of Archbishop Theodore of tarsus [668-90]and it was through the agency of the Roman party that England, and Northumbria in particular, became the prime cultural and religious centre of Europe for several generations.

There is little doubt that historically Wilfrid stands out as the more significant figure, but it is hard not to feel that the moral and spiritual prize in the tumult of the late 7th century went to Cuthbert, though he would have repudiated such a statement whole-heartedly. He was a man of peace who accepted the victory of the opposing party obediently and continued ploughing his own spiritual furrow with a holiness and devotion that really put him above the fray. Bede States:

‘His conversation, seasoned with salt, consoled the sad, instructed the ignorant and appeased the angry; for he persuaded them all to put nothing before the love of Christ, and he placed them all the greatness of future benefits and the mercy of God.’

He was a peacemaker and A true saint.