**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

17TH OF JANUARY ANTHONY OF EGYPT

17TH OF JANUARY CHARLES GORE

19TH OF JANUARY WULFSTAN

20TH OF JANUARY RICHARD ROLLE

21ST OF JANUARY AGNES

ANTHONY OF EGYPT THE GREAT. [251[?}-356] – We have enough reliable documentation about Anthony – his letters, recollections of others, and, above all, his hagiography, written by the famous Athanasius – to make it certain that he is one of the greatest and most influential saints of all. Many of the people we deal with have distinguished themselves in one field or another – perhaps several – but Anthony seems by all accounts to have been an all-round saint; in his formation, his charity, his inner battles, his asceticism, his wisdom, his holiness and his counsel. Although his letters contain quotes from philosophy and the early fathers, he was not reputed to be learned, but he would counter a philosopher who mocked him for ignorance that nature was his book, a theology that made its way right through to Bonaventure in the 13th century.

Kathleen Jones, author of a book on Anglican feasts and commemorations, is rightly suspicious about his 105 years, given the severity of his ascetical practice, but it is clear that he lived a long life, and that he kept his faculties and reason to the very end.

An outline of his life:

* He came of a moderately well-off landed family, but his parents had died by the time he was 20, leaving him to take care of his sister.
* Arriving late for Mass one day he heard the words of Jesus about selling all his possessions and following him: he had a patrimony of about 300 acres which he sold or gave away to neighbours, keeping back just enough for the house, and to sustain himself and his sister.
* Once he was able to find a reliable home for her, Anthony headed for the countryside around his village of Coma, near Alexandria, and visited the various hermits who had settled in the area, listening and learning from them, and noting their particular virtues which he would try to emulate.
* Probably at about the age of 30 he made a definite move further afield, and discovered a cemetery where he settle in a cave.
* He lived here for 13 years, suffering the assaults of demons, be they figments of his imagination, serious temptations or both. Jones suggests they may have been coloured in later under the influence of local Arab traditions of Djinns etc. As Anthony experienced them, they were real enough but he withstood their attacks, albeit to his very great physical and mental cost.
* His friends, who had not lost touch, rescued him, and brought him round in a church, but coming to himself, he demanded to be taken back to his hermitage. Where, after further encounters, his cell was flooded with light and Jesus appeared to him, and the demons fled. When Anthony remonstrated with Jesus that he might have helped out, the Lord replied that he had been with Anthony the whole time but had wished to see how he managed to fight the demons off.
* Anthony came back to Alexandria to minister to Christians who were being persecuted, and such was their courage under duress that the governor forbade any monks from attending the trials, but, once again, Anthony withstood them and seems to have got away with it: he was, after all, by this time, a well- respected holy man.
* He then responded to the call to go further into the desert proper, so he travelled with some tribesmen until they arrived at an abandoned fort, in an oasis where there was running water and a few trees. Having chased out all the creepy-crawlies, he settled there for the next 20 years, receiving supplies of bread twice a year, which he managed by some means to keep fresh. His diet was bread and water, but in order to sustain his visitors he planted a small vegetable and herb garden, and eventually started growing his own grain so that he could support himself completely.
* Eventually his friends broke his door down and brought him back to the city, where he continued counselling and guiding those who sought his advice.
* You may recall that Athanasius encountered Anthony during one of his periods of exile, and wrote his famous ‘life’ only a year after Anthony’s death in 356, so we should not be surprised to read that Anthony preached energetically against schismatics and heresies, and in particular the Arians.
* One way and another, during these last years, Anthony’s reputation as a man of God became internationally renowned, and Athanasius’ ‘Life’ and his disciples, especially Abba Macarios, propagated his wisdom and teachings down to the middle of the 5th century, when John Cassian and John Climacus wrote their hugely influential compilations of the sayings and stories of the desert fathers.
* Athanasius’ short treatise became the model for future hagiographies right down to the late middle ages.

This is the merest outline of Anthony’s life and achievements, which, in itself, would have been sufficiently impressive, but in his spirituality, his leadership and his wisdom Anthony stands at the head of the immensely important era of the desert fathers and it is their teachings and stories that inspired Christian spirituality in the east, and later on in the west, while Athanasius and the urban theologians quarrelled and at time literally fought for their positions on the trinity and the person of Jesus.

There are so many aspects of Anthony’s life that could be treated at length. but we might touch on one or two aspects of relevance to people in lock-down.

When authors and journalists bring out the trope that so-and-so was ‘fighting their demons’ it is unlikely that their perspective reaches as far back as Anthony. The ‘Ramayana’ features several books describing enormous battles between Ram, an incarnation of the chief God, and armies of rather splendid and resourceful demons who have their own divine backers and surpass Ovid’s ’Metamorphoses’ in their shape-shifting abilities. Remarkably, however, some of the most threatening heavyweight demons change sides and throw in their lots with the goodies and contribute significantly to the hard-won victory. Jesus releases Anthony to grow into the great soul that he became by keeping a watching brief, so that these fearful demons, by whatever means Anthony experienced them, effectively became the means of strengthening his faith and inner resource to the extent that he was able to taunt them by saying; ‘If you have ANY power, go ahead and use it but I won’t give into you.’

If you have ever stood in a wilderness –not to mention a desert [they are different environments] even for a few minutes, when all you can hear is the workings of your body, you soon become aware of the openness of both space and time: a vehicle will pass along the way, but that is the only hope of security you have, but once off the beaten track, there is nothing to connect you with other people.

The tradition of spending time in the wilderness in order to find a spiritual centre goes right back to the Old testament: John the Baptist and Jesus made use of this resource, as did Mohammed and the early Khalifs, while the most ascetic of the eastern monks and those in the west found rocky fastnesses in which to build their monasteries. Jesus’ experiences in the wilderness are well known, and while bible scholars discuss what might actually have happened, the mental and spiritual process by which it happened should be clear enough. Anthony underwent the same mental and spiritual ‘purification,’ whether the ‘demons’ appeared in the form of temptations, phobias, fears, panics or whatever, and the result for him was a foundation of strength and assurance that came to him by the practice of prayer and meditation.

By a similar route Carl Jung made a resolution in the interest of pursuing his own psychoanalytic research to ‘go down’ into the depths of his own unconscious mind as best he might: ‘don’t do this at home[!!!] Lone yachtsmen and women travel the same road and interestingly faith does not always appear to be a pre-requisite for a successful outcome, but the saying goes that ‘there are no atheists at sea.’ The point is that experiences such as those of Anthony and Jung can be make or break: In the middle ages some hermits and anchorites went mad.

What people call ‘cabin fever’ induces panic attacks, and if you are experiencing them for the first time you may not even be aware of what they are and how to deal with them. These panics can arise even in the presence of another person if we perceive them to be unsympathetic or hostile, but a sympathetic voice, even over the phone, can bring relief. Often it is a matter of relaxation and deep breathing, but that can feel counter-intuitive. Having once survived, the experience should become less scary, and with the resource of prayer it’s possible to spot the dangers before they arise. Loneliness is one thing; for people suffering from anxiety prolonged periods of isolation can be dangerous and it is for these vulnerable groups that mental health charities and other concerned bodies advocate to the government.

Responding over the phone to somebody who is suffering from the effects of loneliness or desperation can be difficult, and for that reason people whose work requires them to do so are usually trained. For the rest of us the difficulty can simply be our own awareness that we cannot do very much to help, and sometimes we may feel afraid of becoming enmeshed in the other person’s confusion, apathy or despair. In these situations an awareness of God’s grace working through us is our own resource, and very often the best we can do is simply to listen, armed with our own willingness to understand what may be going on within ourselves in response to the other. Very often it is precisely this listening ear that helps, whereas trying to hand out advice or wisdom simply acts as another resistance: ‘go away, I can’t deal with you.’ There is another clue: the counsellor and psychotherapist Patrick Casement states: Reassurance does not reassure:’ ‘I’m sure you’ll [it’ll] be fine, should, and usually does elicit the response: ‘Says who?’ Anthony transformed all of these perfectly understandable forms of resistance into the basis of real spiritual counsel, no doubt a little at a time!

Apart from every conceivable temptation Anthony suffered – he was a young man when he chose his path, and like many people before and after him, had to deal with the business of what Eliot terms ‘desire and control.’ Gold and silver would appear in his desert path, which he was nimble-witted enough to understand that on a desert road it would be unlikely that such things were real. One of the toughest temptations was ‘impure thoughts’ which, of course, referred to sexual fantasy, and, sure enough, seductive women appeared to him, by means of which he learned that temptation is best negotiated rather than dismissed or denied, although by means of ascetic practice he could eventually ‘turn off’ his responses:

‘He who sits in solitude in his cell escapes three wars; hearing, speaking and seeing, yet one thing shall he continually battle; that is, his own heart.’

 Confucius remarked that it was not until the age of sixty that his ears obeyed him, which, of course, refers to the habit he had cultivated to filter out those things that were irrelevant to his spiritual development by means of the will. Most of us acquire versions of this willpower over time and with experience, but the positive aspiration of serving God and neighbour helped Anthony deal with shape-shifting temptations, while the rest of us learn to merely discern the distinction between fantasy and probability, if we’re not imagining that we can beat the bookie, or that excessive dependence on chemicals, be they alcohol, drugs, sugar or carbs, will help

The third snare Anthony seems to have won out over is the abiding peril of what the church fathers describe as ‘Accidie,’ which Gregory the great included in the seven deadly sins under the heading ‘sloth.’ Boredom and indecision are frequent and very understandable temptations attendant on isolation which Anthony avoided by means of physical labour, something which practically every monastic rule included in the daily schedule. Many people saw the positive side of the first lock-down and formed projects, many of which seem to have brought routine, a sense of achievement, joy and even a change of direction in life. At the third time of asking, and with disillusion with the government growing, some have abandoned the idea of projects, but the notion of simply passing, or – worse still – killing time was another temptation Anthony had to negotiate. .

All this sounds extraordinarily grim, as though Anthony was the paster saint no truly spiritual person ever wishes to become. Fortunately he was not only human, but humane as well. The story goes that a hunter visited him one day wishing, as so many visitors did, to learn something to his spiritual advantage. He was shocked to find Anthony sitting about with friends, laughing and thoroughly enjoying himself. When the hunter registered his disillusion, Anthony asked him to draw his bow and shoot an arrow into the sky, which the hunter was happy to do, but after another half dozen bowshots had been obediently let off the poor hunter protested that any more would be likely to break the bow: ‘Yes,’ replied Anthony, and if we carry on working without relaxation we’ll break too.’

Athanasius’ ‘life of St Anthony’ is short and easily available, and there are reliable books on the desert fathers by Helen Wardell, Rowan Williams’ ‘Silence and Honey Cakes’ and a good penguin introduction. The desert fathers are by no means irrelevant to people struggling in lock-down.

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WULFSTAN [1009-95] was Bishop of Worcester from 1065.

He was educated at Evesham Priory and Peterborough, and entered the cathedral priory at Worcester, where he was successively Master of Boys, cantor and sacristan, before being made bishop in the reign of Edward the Confessor. He was sent north by Harold Godwinson to try to gather support for his accession to the throne, but the Danes were against Harold, and the rest is history. Wulfstan was the first bishop to surrender his see to William the Conqueror, and for whatever reason, possibly because Wulfstan had firm connections among Benedictines in northern France, was allowed to retain his bishopric. This was a very tricky period in English church history: during Wulfstan’s tenure at Worcester Stigand, the Anglo-Saxon Archbishop of Canterbury was removed from office and replaced by Lanfranc, and Wulfstan, who was reputed to have been of serene and gentle disposition, must have been a skilled diplomat.

The Danes having destroyed the old cathedral, Wulfstan attended to its re-building, although little of his work remains. His tomb is still to be seen in the crypt, and for many years after his death pilgrims came to pay tribute. The other tomb of note in Worcester cathedral is King John.

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RICHARD ROLLE [of Hampole] [d.1349]. Richard, who was born probably around 1300 near Pickering, in North Yorkshire, was a hermit, but one as different from Anthony as it was possible to have been.

He came from a poor family, as evidenced by the fact that the Archdeacon of his diocese financed him at Oxford, where, however, he abandoned his studies without a degree, which doubtless rubbed his patron up the wrong way. At age 18 he left home to become a solitary, modelling a hermit’s garb by cutting up two of his sister’s tunics and his father’s rain hood. The day before the feast of the Assumption Richard attended his local church, but occupied the pew assigned to the lady of the manor, who realising that he was in deep prayer, would not order her servants to move him out. At Mass the following day, after the Gospel he preached such a powerful and beautiful sermon that the constable of Pickering castle took him home, gave him a meal and set him up as a hermit, with appropriate attire and a spot to live.

Richard had a difficult personality; he was often rude, and seems to have occasionally demonstrated marked misogyny. While he paid lip service to acts of charity, it is nowhere evident that he actually ever practised it, and he seems to have moved from place to place but with no apparent shortage of patrons. He had chosen to strike out on his own as a hermit: but was never licenced by a bishop as one, according to the practice of the times.

There were several ‘classes’ of solitaries in 14th-century England; some attached themselves to monasteries; some like Julian were licenced and formally clothed and introduced into their cells where they served the locality; and others depended on noble patrons, who kept them for prayers and spiritual counsel, primarily for themselves, at a time when lay spirituality was developing both in England and on in Europe, though in the latter there was greater emphasis generally on lay communities such as Beguines. Relying on noble patrons, however, made for a rather insecure life: one of Richard’s, Sir John de Dalton, went to prison, leaving his ‘pet’ hermit high and dry.

Eventually Richard seems to have settled down at Hampole, near the Cistercian nunnery, where he gave spiritual direction and counsel, to the nuns’ evident benefit and satisfaction, since they made a record of some of his teachings. He is reputed to have profoundly respected the personal autonomy of his directees; something he must have learnt through the difficult process of transforming his own prickly personality into an empathetic acceptance of others, and particularly of women, making sense of his experiences during what seems to have been a remarkably unpromising spiritual apprenticeship and journey. He died in 1349, probably of the black death – bubonic plague.

Richard was a controversial figure in his time, and was criticised both by Walter Hilton and the author of ‘The Cloud of Unknowing,’ and opinion is still divided today, but mainly among commentators on mysticism: David Knowles contends that Richard fails to qualify as a mystic because of an absence of a ‘dark night,’ which he sees as an essential prerequisite. This is really a complete irrelevance: Thomas Traherne never seems to have suffered from this profound sense of God’s absence, but reader would fail to register him as a mystic. Atwell lists him as ‘spiritual writer’ which is what both men were, and none the worse for that. His works were read with reverence for 300 years after his death.

Richard Rolle’s best- known writing is his ‘fire of love,’ which is available in Penguin, but he also wrote another Latin prose treatise entitled ‘Amends of life.’ He is less well known as a poet, though some of his thinking and teaching are expressed poetically, but modern English translations do not show him as quite the English Petrarch! He wrote, however, in English and in the Northumbrian dialect, and besides his best-know works he was an early translator of part of the bible, before Wyclif, and wrote commentaries on the Song of Songs and some of the psalms.

His spirituality embodies three pertinent ideas: warmth, [fervour; fire], sweetness and melody, and a clue to its nature may be discerned in the third, melody.’ Richard was clearly capable of some beautiful and powerful ex tempore preaching, and what, from a theological standpoint seems like a lack of system simply means that his gift was spontaneous. The fact that the chair of poetry at Cambridge is occupied by an exponent noted for spontaneity should help us to realise that literature, like music, can host disciplines other than those expressed in writing, and that both can be practised by the same artist, just as Mozart and Beethoven would improvise their cadenzas having first formulated their ideas on paper.

Many Christians do not realise that the Old Testament prophets were probably street performers, whose utterances were later systematised as best their disciples could recollect, before being put on paper. Richard seems to have had something of a prophetic voice, and even the prophetic personality, which was often quite abrasive. It does seem that he did most of his writing in the comparative security of his time at Hampole, so that something of the same process may have been at work, ‘recollecting in tranquillity’ at a stage in his spiritual journey when his emotional conflicts had been all but resolved.

What does seem to have stayed with him, however, was that part of the prophetic voice that longs for justice very much in accordance with much social and political writing in the 14th century, Richard had revolutionary tendencies, which expressed themselves in the peasants’ revolt, in Wycliffe, and rather more tamely in ‘Piers Plowman’ and Chaucer. When Richard was asked how he knew that God was to be found only among the poor, he replied that Jesus told us so.

Another aspect of this was Richard’s very strict asceticism: he prayed to God to make him suffer in this life so that he would not be condemned in the next, and if he died during the Black Death he would certainly have had his prayer answered.

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CHARLES GORE [1853-1932] was an important figure in the high church movement as well as in the church generally.

He was educated at Harrow and Baliol College, Oxford, and became a Fellow aged 27. He rapidly distinguished himself as a liberal Catholic theologian, and became Principal of Cuddesdon Theological College, and at Oxford and as Canon of Westminster he distinguished himself as a preacher. After the death of Edward Pusey, a memorial fund led to the establishment of a house in his honour, as a new resource for theological teaching and research, and Charles was made its first Principal when he was only 30.

In 1887, at Pusey house, Charles inaugurated what in 1892, became the Community of the Resurrection together with five other men, on lines not dissimilar to those of the Oratorians, committed to regular prayer and simplicity of life, annually renewing their vows of celibacy: ‘destined to combine together to reproduce the life of the first Christian continuing steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching of fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and saying that none of the things which each possessed was his own, but having all things in common.’ The community started up in Oxford but by 1898 moved to Mirfield in Yorkshire.

In 1889 Charles helped to found the Christian Social Union, together with Henry Scott-Holland and Brooke Foss Westcott, [whom we looked at recently.] This was Charles’ determination to apply his liberal Catholicism to the problems of the poor and the needy and the deprived.

In the same year he became known following the controversy surrounding ‘Lux Mundi’ [Light of the world] a volume of essays that he edited in order , as he put it, ‘for their own sake, no less than for others, to attempt to put the Catholic faith into its right relation to modern intellectual and moral problems … not as guessers of truth but as servants of the Catholic Creed and Church ... in an epoch of profound transformation, intellectual and social abounding in new needs, new points of view, new questions and certain, therefore, to involve great changes in the outlying departments of theology where it links up to other sciences, and to necessitate some general restatement of its claim and meaning.’

What caused very great controversy in ‘Lux Mundi; was Charles’ own exposition of kenosis, the idea that God’s self-emptying in Christ revealed God

‘but through, and under conditions of a true human nature. Thus he used human nature, its relations to God, its conditions of experience, its growth in knowledge, its limitation of knowledge … he showed no signs at all of transcending his age. Equally he shows no signs of transcending the history of his age. He does not reveal his eternity by statement as to what happened in the past, what is to happen in the future, outside the ken of existing history.’

Charles held this view as being precisely embodied in the Anglican appeal to scripture, antiquity and reason, but which conservatives was anathema.

His Bampton lectures, in 1899, extremely well attended, continued his Christological theme, and attracted condemnation from both extremes in the church for views which are now generally accepted in the middle ground of Anglican theology, if not always and everywhere in the pews. There were objections when he was made Bishop of Worcester in 1902,

At Worcester, among other administrative reforms he realised that while Birmingham was part of his diocese, the city needed a separate one of its own, which he then took over in 1905 having contributed £10,000 of his own money toward the cost. In 1911 he was translated to Oxford where he was not always content, particularly in his cold and draughty palace, and felt much happier once he had retired in 1919 to his ‘beloved hovel’ near All Saints Margaret Street, but he disliked being admin, and described being a bishop as ‘a dog’s life.’ He went everywhere on public transport, dispensed with a secretary.

There had been problems in the university too: Charles, though a liberal Catholic, found himself unable to accept the new ‘modern’ theology, denying the virgin birth, the miracles and a physical resurrection: [revolutions devouring their children again!] At 66 he was ready to retire and spent his last years very productively, writing on world peace, the League of Nations, industrial order, church unity, biblical scholarship etc.

In a thoughtful manual he wrote for Christians trying to cope with the first world war, he argues that petitionary prayer does not involve any attempt to change God’s mind, but rather: ‘here are multitudes of things which God means for us and for our brethren which will never be ours or theirs unless we pray for them … prayer is a method of liberating the hand of God to do what he would do but cannot do unless we correspond with his will … How many men during this war who had long given up praying have flung themselves on their knees and prayed; “Merciful god, I pray thee to keep my Tom safe;” a welcome return to prayer… We should never cease to pray thus fervently and thus particularly for the things that we particularly need.’

He was good with people, had a great sense of fun, and seems to have enjoyed teasing people whom he found pious and conservative: he once asked a rather sanctimonious clergyman for the loan of his bible, which he had forgotten, despite having remembered his pipe. He is also reputed to have said words to the effect that 20 minutes in the zoo would make him an atheist. William Temple, however, said of him that of all his tutors, Charles had been his true spiritual father.

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AGNES was another child martyr, with the difference that her story is very well attested, but nonetheless distasteful.

By now you can guess the story: family arranged a marriage when she was 12 or 13, and Agnes preferred to retain her virginity for the sake of her Lord, and refused to sacrifice during the last months of the Dioclesian persecution in the early 4th century.

A church, Santa Agnese in Agono, exists on Piazza Novono in Rome, built over her tomb, which was discovered in the early C18.