**WHEN THE SAINTS…**

23RD of FEBRUARY POLYCARP

27th of FEBRUARY GEORGE HERBERT

POLYCARP [martyred c160] – The records insist that Polycarp was a venerable old man of 86 when he was martyred around the year 160, so by doing the maths we arrive at a birth date of around 74 c e which is only nine years after the deputed date of Peter and Paul’s martyrdom in Rome. As a youth and a young man, then, it is perfectly feasible that he would have been acquainted with ‘many people who knew the Lord’ when they were younger, as Polycarp’s own disciple, Irenaeus testifies. Polycarp was known to have been a disciple of John.

Doing the maths again, we know that John the disciple is portrayed as a young man, and he may have been a follower of the Baptist before joining Jesus. If, then, we assign John a putative date of birth between – let us say – 10 and 15 C E, a young man born in 74 would have time to become meaningfully acquainted with him while John was in his 70’s. This, in turn, authenticates much that Polycarp passed on to his own disciple, Irenaeus.

This said, the only document that has come down to us from Polycarp himself is his letter to the Philippians, presumably a generation after that of Paul to the same church. Frankly, however, there is not a great deal of original material in it: instructions and exhortations to good behaviour and reminders to deacons, presbyters and virgins of their duties. Instructing widows to keep clear of suspicion seems distasteful today, but widows were supposed to re-marry below a certain age; and expected, in any case, to make their own living if they were young enough, and, of course – strains of Housing Benefit fraud here – not to be an unnecessary burden on the church’s finances if they found another means of support, i.e. a boyfriend.

Irenaeus commended Polycarp for his gravity, holiness and pastoral care but reading between the lines of the letter you might have preferred to take your troubles to someone else. There is an extraordinary moment during the account of his martyrdom when he offers his interrogator to appoint a day for Polycarp to teach him about the faith. When the latter suggests he might teach the crowd he more or less tells the governor that they are not worth teaching, but that he is under instruction to respect those appointed by God to be rulers: some pastoral care!

Polycarp became Bishop of Smyrna in 107, so that he must have been in place for more than half a century which would explain why he was so well known in the locality. Irenaeus states that he preached and campaigned against gnostic heretics, the two he mentions in his epistle are Valentinus and the Docetists, who claimed that Jesus never inhabited a real physical body. He was content to describe those whose beliefs differed from his own as ‘the first sons of Satan.’ There are saints whose truest witness is commemorated in their martyrdom, and perhaps Polycarp is one of these.

It seems that when the persecution broke out his congregation were keen that he should make himself scarce, but he only moved to a farmstead near the city, where he was betrayed by one of his household servants under torture. When this pitiful character was forced to lead a squad of soldiers to arrest Polycarp he is said to have greeted them cheerfully; asked for an hour in which to pray, and had a meal set for them, saying grace and inviting them to eat. The account goes on to relate that many of the soldiers were unable to understand why they had been sent out to arrest such a grand old man, but we have to beware of hagiographic waffle here as everywhere else. The point is that however the story is spun, the circumstances ring entirely true.

In the next scenario the governor took Polycarp into his coach and tried to act ‘Good cop,’ without success, so he was thrown out of the coach roughly, and arrived at the arena where there was supposedly so much noise that nothing and nobody could be heard. Again the governor tried ‘making nice: ‘Have some respect for your age…’ ‘Is it such a bad thing to give Caesar a little tribute?’ Eventually Polycarp cut to the chase and publicly declared himself a Christian: ‘I have served my Lord these last eighty-six years and he has done me no wrong: why would I cease to serve him now?’ Threats of animals and burning followed, to which Polycarp retorted: ‘Bring them on’ and true to himself he assured his interrogators that fire awaited all unbelievers. Subtlety does not appear to have been Polycarp’s strong suit but just then subtlety was not what was needed.

By this time the crowd, goaded on by the Jews, according to the account, were bellowing for Polycarp to be thrown to the beasts, but the animal show was over, so he was sentenced to be burned. According to the story he assured his executioners that he would not need to be nailed to the post, so they merely bound him, but when the fire was set, the flames formed a halo round him and he was unhurt, so he was dispatched with a dagger or a sword – take your pick.

One interesting aside about martyrdom occurs which was a well-established tradition by the time of the empire-wide persecutions of the third and early fourth centuries; that people seeking martyrdom for its own sake – Polycarp names one Quintus – do not count as martyrs at all. In the case of Polycarp himself, however, even discounting the obvious elements of hagiography, what seems clear is that Roman governors and their civil servants often did what they could reasonably do to save martyrs from themselves. Here, also, as so often elsewhere, crowds of spectators were usually entirely callous about the suffering of the victims in the arena, though when we come to Felicity and Perpetua next month we see a little more compassion.

Most martyrdoms are written up as exemplars for future readers and generations to follow: there are elements of Polycarp’s trial and execution that to some extent imitate that of Jesus himself. This story became very widely influential as the epitome of the brave and courageous martyr facing off the enemies of God with stoicism and good humour. When the governor encouraged him to shout: ‘Away with the atheists!’ he shouted it, waving at the crowd!!!

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

GEORGE HERBERT [1593-1633] – Those of us who knew David Wheeler at St Saviour’s may remember his two cats, George and Herbert.

The DLT ‘Traditions of Christianity Spirituality’ series deals with most of the major streams of the faith, with various subheadings intended to characterise each tradition in a single epithet; some task, and brilliantly done: ‘Standing in God’s Holy Fire’ for the Byzantines; ‘Grace that frees’ for the Lutheran; ‘Heart speaks to heart’ for the Salesians, whom we featured last month. So what for us Anglicans: ‘The poetic imagination.’

Those of us who try to take in the words of some of the hymns we sing on Sundays might throw up our hands in horror at such a characterisation, though there are shining exceptions, among them ‘Let all the world in every corner sing,’ which George Herbert originally placed as his ‘antiphon ‘ to his series entitled ‘the H communion.’ As a poet among poets with Shakespeare, Milton and Chaucer in the top rank, Herbert may stand in the public estimation well below Keats, Shelly and John Betjeman, but this is in a forum that places Kipling’s ‘If’ at ‘top of the pops,’ with Pam Ayres visible and decidedly audible in the vanguard. If it is one thing to be snobbish about public taste, it is quite another to make sense of current literary canon which blasts everything up into the air and lands Benjamin Zephaniah in the poetry chair at Cambridge. God be praised, then, that in an article that commemorates Herbert‘s achievements in holiness, we can disregard current literary theory and wait for the dust to settle.

In an introduction to an anthology of Sufi poets in translation it is cogently pointed out that some were great Sufis less distinguished as poets; others – and we can guess which – may have been outstanding poets but less conscientious Sufis, but a very few rank as both Sufis of very holy life and great poets. Applying this matrix to Christian poets, George Herbert comes up top.

It is not only the quality of Herbert’s sacred poetry that earns him this accolade, but the efforts he forced himself to make in order to put his life into his writing. Henry Vaughan, another near contemporary who runs Herbert a close second – and Donne and Milton are in the running too – described Herbert as ‘A true saint and a seer,’ a writer of ‘Incomparable prophetic poems’, and viewed Herbert’s poetry as virtually a continuation of scripture itself. According to Vaughan, he was: ‘The first that with any effectual success attempted a diversion of this foul and overflowing stream’ of secular poetry in England. This is the age of Ben Johnson’s superb and very learned secular verse, and of Donne’s equally world-renowned love lyrics.

Herbert, who became the Public Orator at Cambridge, dealt with matters between the university and the court, and was tasked with making welcome speeches to the king on his visit, all of which, like many of the early church fathers, bespeaks a thorough education in the whiles of classical rhetoric, a prerequisite to a shining career at court or in the legal profession. Donne, in particular, took trouble to show off his learning and wit in his poetry. Herbert’s stated aim, on the contrary, was to find a simpler mode of expression which led to the wonderful compression that we find in his best work. This in itself involved an element of sacrifice on a number of levels: clever and learned verse would get him recognition, whereas ploughing his own harrow meant that his poetry was only anthologised after his death by his friend Nicholas Ferrar.

George Herbert came from the upper crust, whereas Donne most certainly did not, and got himself into a few nasty scrapes before becoming established as Dean of St Paul’s, and none the worse for that: it was the route taken by any educated man to scramble as near to the top as he could. Herbert, on the other hand, travelled in the opposite direction. The whole of his background, education and contacts fitted him for courtly life, but, despite biographers who take it that he turned to the religious life only after his career chances took a nose-dive, as early as 1610, at the age of 17, he wrote in a letter to his mother containing two sonnets, that he had resolved to write only religious poetry. On the 18th of March 1618, aged 25, he made it clear to his step-father, Sir John Danvers, in a letter that: ‘you know, sir, how I am now setting foot into divinity, to lay the platform of my future life.’

So much for introduction.

George Herbert was born on 3rd April 1593 at Montgomery Castle in Wales, the fifth son of Richard and Magdalene Herbert. One of his brothers, Edward, became the famous Lord Herbert of Cherbury, among whose other accomplishments, a book of lute music was compiled.

In 1596, Richard died, leaving his wife with seven sons and three daughters, to move in with her mother for several years, before moving to Oxford in 1599. In 1601 the family’s final move was to establish itself at Charing Cross, where they lived in some style, with servants and a chaplain. In 1605, aged 12, George began at Westminster School, and thence to Trinity College Cambridge in 1609, the same year that Magdalene re-married, to Sir John Danvers.

George received his BA in 1613; and in the following year became a Minor Fellow: in 1616 he was Major Fellow and the following year Sub-lector. In 1618 George became Praelector at Cambridge and in 1620 he was appointed Public Orator for the university, a post he held for ten years until 1628.

In 1624 George Herbert was elected MP for Montgomery, and later in the same year he was ordained deacon. In 1625 Nicholas Ferrar established his community at Little Gidding and became a friend. The poet John Donne had been a friend of George’s mother for many years, and preached her memorial sermon at her death in 1627, which was published later, together with George’s tribute to her, ’Memoriae Matris Sacrum’ in Latin and Greek verse. In 1629 George married Jane Danvers, a love match of which another friend, Isaac Walton, avowed that ‘the eternal lover of mankind made them equal in their mutual affection.’

On 29th April 1630 George was installed as Rector of the parish of Fugglestone-cum-Bemerton near Salisbury, and on 19th September he was ordained priest at Salisbury Cathedral. He proved a conscientious pastor and priest, but was only there for three years before his death in 1633: as far back as 1610 he had written to his mother of his ‘late ague,’ from which it is assumed that he suffered from consumption throughout his life. Later in the same year ’The Temple’ was published in Cambridge under the supervision of Nicholas Ferrar, and in 1652 the remains of his writings were published, including ‘The Country Parson.’

One of the many joys of reading Herbert’s poetry is the way he used rhythm: this is best understood when we realise that among his other accomplishments he was a very gifted musician, on both lute and viol, which, by the way, would have been counted as one of the necessary ornaments of a gentleman, together with reading music at sight. In addition, however, he used often to walk from his parish into Salisbury to play the cathedral organ. This was the age of the madrigal, the lute song, and the consort of viols, besides producing a whole host of brilliant keyboard-players. Herbert was often just applying the lyric skills in a deeply religious setting.

Another way in which he managed to resolve tensions within himself and within the church of his time was by finding a middle way between the Calvinism that he would have imbibed at the Cambridge of his day with its reaction under the auspices of Archbishop Laud and Charles I. Part of his drive for simplicity subsisted in his determination not to show off his learning, which, in turn, involved avoiding the trap of getting enmeshed in the theological mud-slinging that was a part of church life at this time [and when did it ever cease?] By these means he contrived to get straight to the deepest theological and spiritual truths, at least as the church seeks to know them, and in doing so became one of the very finest Christian poets of all time.

The editor of the volume dedicated to George Herbert and Henry Vaughan in ‘The Oxford authors’ series writes:

‘The poems dramatize the self in the act of conforming almost every sort of problem met by a devout Christian in his day, problems of sin and salvation; faith, grace, predestination, conscience, assurance, confession, communion, baptism – every issue finds echo here within the soul of the speaker as he attempts, in the presence of God, to quell the quarrels of sense with spirit, of doctrine with doctrine, and to find a way in which his ideal of family may in some measure work within the self: ‘what doth this noise of thought within my heart, As if they had a part? … Turn out these wranglers which defile the seat: ‘for where thou dwellest all is neat.’

‘He was, himself, official orator at Cambridge; a man who had trained himself to use all the flowers of rhetoric. He frequently speaks of his lute and his ditties; His kindred arts of music and poetry… his problem is how to subdue these acquirements to the service of God; how to display his craft and wit without self-interest; how to praise God with his ‘versing’. The problem and the solution are both presented in [his poem] ‘Jordan.’

An invaluable insight into George Herbert the parish priest is found in his short treatise: ‘The Priest in the Temple,’ or ‘The Country Parson.’

‘The Country Parson’ when he is to read divine service, composeth himself to all possible reverence, lifting up his heart and hands and eyes, and using all other gestures which may express a hearty and unfeigned devotion. This he doth as first being truly touched and amazed with the majesty of God before whom he then presents himself: yet naught as himself alone, but as presenting with himself the whole congregation whose sins he then mirrors, and brings, with his own, to the heavenly altar to be bathed and washed in the sacred laver of Christ’s blood.’

His sight is example, he having often instructed his people how to carry themselves in divine service, exacts of them all possible reverence, by no means enduring either talking, or sleeping, or gazing, or leaning, or half-kneeling, or any unfruitful behaviour in them, but causing them, when they sit or stand or kneel, to do all in a straight and steady posture, as attending to what is done in the church, and every man and child answering aloud both ‘amen,’ and all other answers which are on the clerks and people’s part to answer; which also to be done not in a huddling or slobbering fashion, gaping, or scratching the head, or spitting, even in the midst of their answer, but gently and plausibly thinking what they say; so that while they answer … they meditate as they speak, that God hath ever had his people that have glorified him as well as now, and that he shall have so forever.

This is what the apostle calls ‘a reasonable service’ when we speak not as parrots without reason, or offer up such sacrifices as they did of old which was of beasts devoid of reason; but when we use our reason and apply our powers to the service of Him that gives them.

If there be any of the gentry or nobility of the parish who sometimes make it a piece of state not to come at the beginning of the service with their poor neighbours, but at mid prayers, both to their own loss and of theirs also who gaze upon them when they come in, and neglect the present service of God, he by no means suffers it, but after diverse gentle admonitions, if they persevere, he causes them to be presented: or if the poor church wardens be affrighted with their greatness, notwithstanding his instructions that they ought not to be, but even to let the world sink, so they do their duty; he presents them himself, only protesting to them that not any ill will draws him to it, but the debt and obligation of his calling being to obey God rather than men.

 What of the country parson preaching?

‘…When he preaches he procures attention by all possible art, both by earnestness of speech, it being natural to men to think that where is much earnestness, there is somewhat worth hearing; and by a diligent and busy cast of his eye on his auditors, with letting them know that he observes who marks, and who not; and with particularising of his speech, now to the younger sort, then to the elder; now to the poor and now to the rich. This is for you, and this is for you, for particulars awake and touch more than generals. Herein also he serves himself of the judgments of God, as of those of ancient times to especially of the late ones; and those most, which are nearest to his parish; for people are very attentive at such discourses, and think it behoves them to be so when God is so near them, and even over their heads.

‘Sometimes he tells them stories and sayings of others, according as his text invites him; for them also men heed and remember better than exhortations, which, though earnest, yet often die with the sermon especially with country people, which are thick and heavy, and hard to raise to a point of zeal and fervency; and need a mountain of fire to kindle them; and stories and sayings they will well remember. …

Significantly, in view of everything else in his life that he has worked to simplify, Herbert continues:

‘But the character of his sermon is holiness’ is not witty or learned or eloquent, but holy ... so that the audience may plainly perceive that every word is heart-deep.’

‘By frequent wishes of the people’s good joying therein though he himself, while with St Paul even sacrificed upon the service of their faith. For there is no greater sign of holiness, than procuring and rejoicing in another’s good.

‘The parson exceeds not an hour in preaching, because all ages have thought that a competency and he that profits not in that time, will less afterwards, and the same affection that made him not profit before, making him then weary, and so grows from naught relishing, to loathing.

Herbert meets his ‘Billy Bunters’ exactly where they are! When you think that this was the Public Orator of Cambridge University who, in a matter of three years, came to understand the behaviour and psychology of his punters, you can begin to understand that nature of George Herbert’s spiritual transformation; only bear in mind that his willingness to pursue the gentry and noble latecomers would have sprung, in the first place, from their more or less equal social standing, not to mention that his strictures about the thickness and heaviness of country people may not have excluded the upper crust either.

Try during this Lent to get acquainted with some of Herbert’s poetry.