WHEN THE SAINTS …

7TH MARCH PERPETUA, FELICITY AND THEIR COMPANIONS

8TH MARCH EDWARD KING

8TH MARCH GEOFFREY STUDDERT KENNEDY

8TH MARCH FELIX of DUNWICH

PERPETUA, FELICITY and their COMPANIONS – Here we have an account of the martyrdom of a group of young adults, centring on the two women; Perpetua, already a mother, and her slave Felicity, who was married to Revocatus, another slave: there were three other males; Saturus, who may have been a priest, Saturninus and Secundulus, one probably Perpetua’s brother. Atwell suggests that the rest were probably catechumens who were only baptised later in prison[?]

The martyrdoms were written up as a famous hagiography known and read publicly throughout the early church, including Augustine and in 1907one Fr Delattre discovered their names and the date of their executions amid the ruins of the amphitheatre in Carthage.

The first part of the story was dictated by Perpetua herself, while the account from the arena may have been witnessed by Tertullian, who was a contemporary. The whole story is so gruesome that it is worth advising you if you are squeamish to give it a miss, but to recount the events without the holy hokum should bring home to us exactly what could be involved in a martyrdom, and how unmercifully the church authorities treated those who were forced to recant in sheer terror.

The events took place in Carthage in and around this day in the year 203 during persecutions under Emperor Severus.

Vita [or Vibia] Perpetua was of a well-known noble family: she had recently given birth, while her slave Felicity was eight months pregnant. We begin with the words of Perpetua:

‘Prison was a shock … for till then I knew not what such sort of places were.’ Sore and battered from having been jostled by the crowd, and ill-treated by the soldiers, but her chief concern was for her baby, but the deacons of the church managed to bribe guards to let her nurse the child in ‘a more commodious part of the prison.’ My infant being brought to me almost famished, I gave it the breast,’ and she then carefully handed the child to her mother and went back to the dark and terrible prison.

The male prisoners were scourged, and the two women beaten on the face. Felicity was eight months pregnant at the time: she feared that she would not be martyred with the others, because under Roman law a pregnant woman was not executed till after her delivery; but the birth came prematurely probably because of the ill-treatment she had received. When she cried out in labour one of the guards asked her how she would stand being thrown to the wild beasts if she could not stand the pangs of childbirth. She famously answered: ‘It is I who suffer what I now suffer; but then there will be another in me who will suffer for me, because I shall suffer for him.’ She was delivered of a daughter and gave a Christian woman to the newborn baby to bring it up as her own child.

At this point the story is taken up by the eyewitness who may have been Tertullian himself. The occasion was in honour of the emperor’s son. The rest of the story is redacted verbatim from source.

They were condemned as Christians by the Roman authorities and dispatched to the public arena, there the men were mauled by wild animals [a leopard, a wild boar and a bear]

‘Perpetua took up the rear of the procession … The women were stripped naked, placed in nets and were brought into the arena to face a mad heifer [possibly an Aurochs]. Even the crowd was horrified, seeing in one net a delicate young girl, and in the other a woman fresh from childbirth, her full breasts still dripping with milk; so the women were recalled and dressed in loose clothing. Perpetua was thrown to the animal first: falling on her back, she stood up and saw that Felicity had been crushed to the ground. She went and gave her hand to help her up, and so they stood side by side…’

‘Now that the cruelty of the mob had been appeased they were recalled to the gate of life. There Perpetua was supported by a certain Rusticus, a catechumen at the time, who was keeping close to her… [Another female catechumen testifies that Perpetua looked ecstatic as though unaware of what had happened to her, which could be authentic – the result of shock or the ‘out-of-body feeling that is reported by many modern victims of torture.] Her brother was sent into the arena and with one bite of a leopard the crowd, seeing all the blood, bellowed: ‘Well washed; well washed.’ When he lost consciousness he was thrown into the place where victims have their throats cut. ‘But the mob demanded that the Christians be brought back into the open so they could watch the sword being plunged into their bodies … ‘

It is reported that in the case of Perpetua an apprentice gladiator missed her throat at the first thrust and struck a bone, and that she had to ‘guide the hand of the novice gladiator to her throat …’ [this, too, may be hagiography since the account then suggests that the unclean spirits were not sufficiently powerful, unless Perpetua chose to assist in her death!]

 The account speaks of Perpetua gathering up her loose hair in the arena because Roman women only kept their hair loose if they were mourning, and she had to be portrayed as having been entirely fearless: even a Stoic philosopher would surely hesitate to believe that?

In the midst of the hagiography – accounts of unbelievable bravery and words and gestures probably added by the author, there is an authentic account of Roman public executions perpetrated on a given day at Carthage. Compared with the thousands of condemned prisoners – the guilty as well as the innocent – who suffered such appalling judicial murders throughout the duration of the empire, Christians probably constituted a relatively small percentage. At all events there is little need for complacency in our own age.

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EDWARD KING [1829-1910] – Another holy and gentle disciple of Francis de Sales.

Born in London, the son of a clergyman who became archdeacon of Rochester. He was of delicate health, and educated at home until going up to Oxford, where ill health prevented him achieving more than a mere pass for his degree.

Edward went on to Cuddesdon Theological College; was ordained, and in 1858 became Chaplain of the college, and five years later, in 1863, its principal. He also became vicar of the parish of Cuddesdon, where he created opportunities for his students to learn on the job. He himself was a skilled, wise and conscientious pastor, and ran the college with very few rules but a sense of warmth and community. Henry Scott Holland declared that he could charm love out of a stone.

When Gladstone nominated Edward as Regius Professor of Pastoral Theology eyebrows in Oxford were raised because, after all, he had only received a pass degree, but his students recognised him as an exemplar of his subject, and he was very successful, and many students sought him as confessor and spiritual director.

In 1885 Edward King became Bishop of Lincoln. He was a convinced Anglo-Catholic, but broad-minded enough to feel happy to be going to the very diocese that had been the hub of Methodist revival. Despite his elevation, however, between 1880-90 he was hectored and put on trial by the agency of the Church Society, an extreme Evangelical body who accused him of various ‘offences’ – ‘ritual acts against the rubrics of the Prayer Book; to wit: administering the Eucharist facing east towards Jerusalem; had lighted candles on the altar; mixed water and wine in the chalice; absolved and blessed his congregation with the sign of the cross and even allowed the Agnus Dei to be sung. He was tried over many years by the Archbishop A F Benson himself, with the aid of six Evangelical bishops, and Edward complained that the jury was weighted against him. After four years of anxiety and humiliation, the verdict was that everything except facing east and the sign of the cross were permissible. Churchmen rallied round and raised funds for his legal expenses, and clergy continued along their Anglo-Catholic path to? In fact it was generally felt that it was Edward’s transparent holiness and gentleness that had won his case for him, and that a and more belligerent personality might easily have lost it.

Edward King was a man of very great holiness, wisdom and gentleness with an open pastoral heart; making himself available to everyone who sought his help, and even taking over ministry to a condemned man when a prison chaplain found it too much; he improved the training of his clergy immeasurably and influenced a whole generation of them. He lived a simple life, wearing shabby old clothes; travelling everywhere by train and moving from the splendid bishop’s palace into the old tumble-down one in the centre of town.

Those of us who knew Bishop Michael Colclough would instantly recognise the type and character of Edward King.

Here is an excerpt from one of Edward King’s sermons, which is still right on the money today:

‘The words of this Psalm ‘Thy loving correction hath made me great.’ This suggests the possibility of improvement, the need of discipline, and the high standard to be reached. The effect of the gentleness of loving correction of God was to raise the natural character of the psalmist to a higher level than he could otherwise have reached. It should be the same in the application which I have ventured to give to these words this morning.

‘With the resolve to stand firm and true in the defence of God’s truth, remember that the lesson of gentleness implies patience and long-suffering, and waiting for God’s good time and for one another. The progress [thank God] of the Church of England has been wonderful in the last fifty years. There is indeed much yet to be done, many prejudices to be put aside, much ignorance to enlightened, much indifference to be awakened. But we need to remember the words of our text, ‘Thy greatness hath made me great.’ God has waited patiently for us, and brought us up to where we are. Let us try to do to others what God has done to us, and by gentleness to lead them on and make them great. While there is life, there is hope: the penitent thief was accepted at the eleventh hour. The grace of God is as strong today as then. Even the end of a wasted life God will not reject if it be offered with a contrite heart, with true faith in the power of the saviour’s blood.

‘Let all impatience, all harsh judgements of others, all self-seeking, be put aside, and all love of power and the desire to be first. Rather let us strive to take the lower place, ‘in honour of preferring one another.’ Then, when all is over, and we are set down at the supper of the Lamb, and the Bridegroom comes in to see the guests, and the great reversal of human judgements shall take place, and the first shall be last and the last first, may we hope to hear his voice saying to us: “Friend, come up higher.’ Meanwhile, ‘let patience have her perfect work,’ and let gentleness be the characteristic of your strength.

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GEOFFREY STUDDERT KENNEDY [1883-1929] ‘Woodbine Willie.’

There is little enough good to extract from what we know of the first World War: the fraternisation of the common soldiers one Christmas, and ‘Woodbine willie,’ the army chaplain who utterly disregarded conventions of army rank and social class in order to meet the troops just where they were, handing out cigarettes, and gaining the men’s love and respect by example, staying and praying with them; sharing their fear and fatigue, and once winning a military cross for conspicuous bravery, fetching morphia for the wounded under heavy fire, and rescuing two soldiers from shell holes.

Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy was born the seventh son of the vicar in the parish of Quarry Hill, Leeds, growing up in a very affectionate family atmosphere in an industrial slum, with all its attendant misery, poverty, drunkenness and violence. He attended Trinity College Dublin and Ripon Clergy College, and served as curate in a Rugby parish, where the vicar criticized his sermons as ‘journalistic,’ but helped him in his gift with tramps, itinerant workers and poor families. His vicar also encouraged him to develop his talent for open-air preaching.

He was entirely unconventional; losing and forgetting things; wearing whatever came to hand, and giving away possessions and money so freely that his housekeeper insisted on guarding everything, allowing him only a few coins each week for pocket money! He combined an evangelical sense of mission with a deeply sacramental respect for the Eucharist, although he was none too fussy about where he celebrated.

After seven years he volunteered as a chaplain to the forces, and by the end of 1915 he was in France among the troops. Amid the horror and fear of the trenches he seems to have drawn enormous strength from the suffering Christ, something he crystalises in the excerpt below. He wrote to his wife: ‘The best place for a Padre…is where there is most danger….living with the men, praying for them if not with them.’ He spent much time in the front line in the company of the men, listening, talking and arguing, and distributing comforts such as his Woodbines. He felt and shared the soldiers’ fear for himself, despite which in august 1917 he won his Military Cross. For all this he was resented for his informality and ‘slangy’ sermons: getting up to preach with a cigarette in one hand, he might open with: ‘I know what you’re all thinking: here comes a bloody parson’….and then tell them it was unsoldierly to swear [wherever he got that idea from!!]

In 1919 he was demobilised, and was made a King’s Chaplain, with requests to preach and speak flooding in. He took retreats and addressed public meetings: for a time, he served at St Mart-in-the-Fields, where he worked again with the homeless and destitute. His vicar there, the famous Evangelical Dick Shepherd, described him as ‘An ugly little man with wonderful eyes, wearing an immense collar,’ and ‘A Christ-like little Irishman’: note the repetition of ‘little.’ Eventually Kennedy was given a city living at St Edmund, Lombard Street. Towards the end of his brief life he was working for the Industrial Christian Fellowship, which tried to make sense of Christian faith amid the unemployment and inequalities of the 1920’s. He toured the whole of the U K, but died in Liverpool at the age of 46.

The troops recognised and respected his honest and direct approach, which, of course, he had learnt and developed in the slums of Leeds during peacetime. Kennedy had developed a skill-set that many perfectly conscientious Victorian clergy had aspired to when working in the various reform movements that had grown up around Christian Socialism and the university slum projects, but he was supremely qualified to try to deal with the rapid disillusion of returning soldiers who had been promised ‘homes for heroes’ and all the other meaningless jargon that still falls from the lips of governments while they need the service that only the Armed Forces can offer.

Here is an excerpt from ‘the hardest part’ by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy

‘….We must make clear to ourselves and to the world what we mean when we say: ‘I believe in God the Father Almighty.’

‘Good people have told me that my writing is crude and brutal. I would remind you that it is not, and could not be as crude as war, or as brutal as battle. The brutality of war is literally unutterable. There are no words foul and filthy enough to describe it. Yet I would remind you that this indescribably filthy thing is the commonest thing in history, and that if we believe in a God of love at all, then we must believe in the face of war and all it means. The supreme strength of the Christian faith is that it faces the foulest and filthiest of life’s facts in the crude brutality of the cross, and through them sees the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Thousands of men who have fought out here and thousands of their womankind who have waited or mourned for them at home, have dimly felt that the reason and explanation for all this horror was somehow to be found in a crucifix….yet when you talk to soldiers you find that the calvary appeals to them rather as the summary of their problems than their solution.

The vision of the suffering God revealed in Jesus Christ, and the necessary truth of it, first began to dawn on me in the narrow streets and shadowy rooms of an English slum. All that war has done is to batter the essential truth of it deeper in, and cast a fiercer light upon the cross. A battlefield is more striking, but scarcely more really crude and brutal than a slum. Only we have all been suddenly forced to realise war more or less, while it has taken God centuries to make some of us recognise the existence of slums.

In Christ I meet the real God. In him I find no metaphysical abstraction, but God speaking to me in the only language I can understand, which is the human language; God revealed in the only terms I can begin to understand which are the terms of perfect human personality. In him I find the truth that human sin and sorrow matter to God, indeed, are matters of life and death to God, as they must be to me. In him I find the truth that the moral struggle of man is a real struggle because God is in it, in it and beyond it too, for in the risen Christ who conquered death and rose again I find the promise and the guarantee that the moral struggle of our race will issue in victory.

William Temple, Kennedy’s friend, described him as ‘The great gift God gave to our generation,’ and coming from one who arguably qualifies as God’s greatest gift to the following generation, that is praise indeed.

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FELIX of DUNWICH 647 – Dunwich, which used to be a major port, disappeared into the sea centuries ago through coastal erosion, and the only memorial of Felix seems to be the town of Felixstowe.

East Anglian Christianity has a rather rackety history. Having been at one time perhaps the richest kingdom in the Anglo-Saxon settlements in England, it had been pagan until King Raedwald made what can only charitably be described as a partial conversion, leaving pagan and Christian altars together in pagan temples, and renouncing his faith later, and judging from the ship burial that seems to have been effected in his honour, he probably died a pagan.

After Raedwald’s death there was a period of instability: King Eorpwald [sic] accepted the faith but was murdered by the pagan Ricberht who was murdered in turn. When his brother Sigeberht returned from exile in Gaul, he had been converted by a Burgundian named Felix, who was a bishop.

Bede is not clear about what happened next. It seems most likely that Sigeberht, wishing to bring over his own bishop, arranged things with Archbishop Honorius, but it is recorded that Felix went through the motions by approaching him with his wish to evangelise in England, and particularly in East Anglia, where he was sent at Sigeberht’s [formal[ request for a bishop.

By whichever way he was appointed it proved to be a wise move. Felix made his episcopal seat at Dunwich, where he founded a cathedral and school; organised the church along Latin lines and another monastery at Soham. Bede reports that ‘Like a good farmer he reaped an abundant harvest of believers in the spiritual field. He delivered this province from its long-lasting wicked ways and unhappiness and brought it to the Christian faith and works of righteousness, and in full accord with the significance of his own name guided it toward eternal felicity.’

Felix respected the Celtic tradition and honoured Aidan of Lindisfarne and an eminent Irish ascetic named Fursa resided in his diocese. He is remembered for having regularly been seen seated in the freezing east Anglian winter wearing a thin shirt and yet sweating with the glory of his visions. He ended his life in the monastery at Soham.