**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

4TH MAY ENGLISH SAINTS AND MARTYRS OF THE REFORMATION ERA – Rev Robert Atwell writes:

‘This day is set aside to remember all who witnessed to their Christian faith during the conflicts in church and state in England, which lasted from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, but which were at their most intense in the sixteenth. Though the Reform Movement was aimed chiefly at the Papacy, many Christian men and women of holiness suffered for their allegiance to what they believed to be the truth of the Gospel. As the movement grew in strength, it suffered its own internecine struggles, with one group determined that they alone were keepers of truth, and that all others were therefore at best in a state of ignorance, and at worst heretical.’

It seems to be a principle of group dynamics that what may originate as a two-sided conflict invariably generates splinter groups as differences become more extreme on either ‘side:’ history and conflicts in our own time show that when religion, politics and cultural differences combine, they tend to ferment a much more complex and serious evil than superficial and simplistic strategies may be able to resolve.

Martyrs in the 16th century were not invariably created by one side against the other; neither did many of the major movers and shakers of the times meet their deaths with entirely clean hands. Moore and Cranmer are two of the best-known figures who died for their convictions, but both had a hand in hounding others to their deaths.

There are marked differences among the various reforming movements in England and the rest of Europe, both in their origins and their evolution: geography, culture and the machinery of government in each region proved to be major factors in determining outcomes.

Taking the ‘reformation era’ as beginning in 1517 in the German lands, we may mark the treaty of Westphalia in 1648 that concluded the terrible 30-years War as having brought about a lasting settlement there. In Bohemia the betrayal and execution of Jan Hus by the Council of Constance in 1415 created a head of bitter opposition that was ready to support Luther, for all that he seems to have had little enough time for Hus. It was the famous defenestration of imperial ministers at Prague in 1618 that precipitated the 30-years War, but by the time of Westphalia Catholicism had been firmly established in Bohemia by force of arms.

The year 1648 also witnessed the conclusion of the Dutch War of Independence from Spain, in which long-standing commercial links between England and the Netherlands facilitated Elizabeth I to intervene to assist the reformers against Spain primarily as a matter of foreign policy rather than any love for Calvinism.

Protestantism in France was also of the Calvinist stripe, and the ferocious wars of religion there began in earnest with the St Bartholomew massacre of 1572 and the Edict of Nantes seemed to have brought them to a conclusion in 1598 with the accession of Henry IV, but in 1685 Louis XIV revoked it and sent a whole generation of Huguenots into exile and worse.

We should not confuse the widely felt discontent with the very real abuses of the church with any impulse to reform its foundations in doctrine and worship: Erasmus was one of the sternest critics of ecclesiastical abuses, but he took time and trouble to refute Luther, and remained loyally within the Roman fold.

John Wycliffe, against whom the Pope issued no less than 5 anathemas, was protected by John of Gaunt and his ideas spread as far afield as Bohemia, where Hus built on them. Wycliffe’s followers, known as Lollards, propagated views varied considerably, but had in common disregard of confession and the consequent need for indulgences, the Papacy and of veneration of the saints, and consequently, of pilgrimages. Nowadays Wycliffe himself is remembered for translating part of the Bible, but before the advent of printing, this, together with his assertion that the ‘Body of Christ is entirely absent from the host, remained the concern of a relatively small number of academics. Where the Lollards scored heavily was in some powerful sermons.

Very well-researched literature by Eamon Duffy and others have rather demolished the notion that in England, at least in the parish, there was much popular pressure for reform of worship or doctrine for all that there had been awareness of abuses within the church for generations.

Most historians now understand that the break with Rome in England was initiated principally at the will of Henry VIII who attracted some keen followers of Luther on his coat tails, but other than authorising translation of the Bible, Henry remained conservative in doctrine and worship, and that it was not until the reign of Edward VI who was raised as a Protestant, that, between 1547-53 Cranmer got his break and that any significantly Protestant ’reform’ was pushed through Parliament.

As for the monasteries, Cardinal Wolsey had already begun the process of abolition for motives of personal aggrandisement before Cromwell took over, and we should not forget the economic disaster that ensued not only for the monks themselves, but for those many people who were dependent on the monasteries for their livelihoods, and whose plight was the primary cause of the Pilgrimage of Grace, the rebellion in the north that very nearly overthrew Henry, and which he was only able to suppress by means of treachery and the most atrocious cruelty.

As usual it was the lives of thousands of ordinary people that were wrecked by these ‘religious’ wars which so often masked power struggles among ‘over-mighty subjects’ whom modern parlance would term ‘war lords.’ What initially saved England from the worst excess of these blood baths was the fact that the Wars of the Roses had been fought to a standstill in the 15th century, and that by the end of his reign in 1547 Henry VII, whatever we think of him, had stamped his authority on the country. The other saving grace was that Elizabeth I was blessed with sound counsel in coming to her settlement in 1558 and reigned for long enough to see the foundations of Anglicanism laid.

Most importantly, though, almost nobody in this ‘reformation era’ would have understood our dichotomy between religion and politics. Our mistake is to think only of a handful of the ‘great and the good’ who went to trial and execution on primarily religious indictments when the real casualties were the ordinary people caught up in rebellions and wars in which they became collateral damage.

Taking these factors into consideration it may lend us some perspective to realise that the number of English people whom tradition has given the honorific of martyr may have been surprisingly few; Only a handful of genuinely religious martyrs under Henry VIII, while ‘Bloody Mary’ disposed of some 350 at the stake during a reign of five years, but under Elizabeth some 650, mostly in the Catholic cause, were executed as traitors to the state rather than as heretics. The civil war here was bitter and even divided families, but compared with those in France, and in particular the pan-European 30-years War it was a tea party.

‘Some of us may remember Mark Santer as a former Bishop of Kensington, and following the quotation by Robert Atwell above, there is a passage from Bishop Mark’s book: ‘Their Lord and Ours’ that asserts the right of any group to cherish its own memories of the past, but not to ’weaponize’ these myths with their prejudices and omissions, in order to try to place other such groups in the wrong; and that sin approaches near to blasphemy when anyone fails to remember that Christ died in order to bring all people together.

The process of healing these divisions can only be assisted if we take time to examine and learn from the best of each tradition and understand that there have been remarkable achievements on all sides that surely transcend any man-made or politically derived divisions.

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8TH MAY JULIAN OF NORWICH [c1343-after 1416]

**BACKGROUND** – The Second half of the fourteenth century in England, following the Black Death, was a time of very great social and economic turmoil with rulers suppressing the advantage that labourers were able to snatch from the fact that there were fewer of them to go round. Not only did the rulers cap their wages, but three increasingly exorbitant pole taxes in rapid succession brought about what is mistakenly referred to as the ‘Peasants’ Revolt’ in 1381.

The revolt – or should we say ‘revolts’ – were mostly led by the middling sort and were rather more discriminating in their targets than historians have indicated in the past. One victim, who fails to make it into the parade of Anglican martyrs, was Archbishop Simon Sudbury, who took time off from his high calling to organise tax collections for ‘Caesar’ and was lynched by a mob that broke into the Tower.

If England was in ferment, so was the church elsewhere: the Papacy had migrated to Avignon, and then, when an effort was made to bring it back to Rome another French ‘Pope’ was elected, and things got worse before they got better. Chaucer’s ‘Prologue’ paints a portrait of Religious and minor clergy at the time, as does Langland’s ‘Piers Plowman.’ Is it, then, counter-intuitive to imagine that for some people of deep faith one way of surviving these extraordinarily harsh times would have been to take refuge as a recluse?

Part of the answer lies in the number of Carthusian foundations that were set up in late 14th-century England; a number of cells built around a church, inhabited by monks who associated only for Sunday worship and the occasional chapter; a strict and austere vocation that had not previously attracted many adherents in England.

The earliest of the Desert Fathers were hermits, which is to say they would occasionally leave their dwellings and even move them, as many did in time, so that a group formed of hermits who could be at shorter distances from one another for the purposes of association and mutual support if necessary. Hermits feature in Malory’s ‘Morte d’Arthur’ and right through the middle ages, though there was sometimes cross-over between the hermitage and the monastery as vocations changed and developed.

By the 14th century much had changed, particularly since the burgeoning of different monastic orders with varying emphases and disciplines, but the reclusive life had persisted: One model was that of the hermit, to live in an isolated, though not necessarily secluded spot from which they were permitted to leave for the purposes of making their living, and while some were attached to and supervised by a monastic order, such as Richard Rolle, others, no doubt, were self-referred.

An Anchorites, on the other hand, lived in more populated areas, and most towns would have at least one: they usually took possession of their anchorage after their vocation had been tested by an officer appointed by the bishop of their diocese. Such an examination would include an assurance that the person was able to support themselves; by sowing or embroidery for a woman, writing or illumination or copying for a man.

Of the four roughly contemporary authors known as’ The English Mystics’ Richard Rolle was a hermit, Julian an Anchoress, and Walter Hilton and the author of ‘The Cloud of Unknowing’ were writing for persons in process of taking up the life of a recluse, so what was the deal?

An Anchoress like Julian would usually take possession of her cell after a service very similar to a burial, intended to demonstrate that she had died to the world: she may even have been laid on a bier; the form of service varied according to the diocese, but, having been prayed over and censed, she would be led into the anchorage; a blessing spoken, and with the bishop or his officer safely on the other side, the order would be given to brick in the entrance.

Anchorages built on the side of a church, like Julian’s would have a world-side window and a church-side, so that she could see Mass being administered, and receive communion. Once installed, an anchorite would never be expected to leave their cell, and part of their rule involved preparation for [physical] death.

We can glean some idea of the life of an anchoress from a 13th-century manual devised for them called ‘The Anchoring Rule’ and among other guidance, the daily routine read like this:

3.30am: Rise; preliminary prayers & devotions.

5.00am: Matins; Lauds and Prime of our Lady with other devotions.

8.00am Terce of our Lady; Litany of the Saints, with penitential Psalms and gradual psalms; prayers before the cross.

11.30am Mass with communion 15 times a year; Sext and None of our Lady, meal and rest period; private prayers & meditation; vernacular readings.

4.00pm Vespers of our Lady;

5.00pm Compline of our Lady.

7.00pm Bed-time prayers and devotions.

The prayers were accompanied by various gestures and postures: standing; kneeling; outstretched arms; signs of the cross; kissing the earth. Fasts and vigils were also recommended, but no mention is made of the more extreme bodily austerities that we read of among other mediaeval religious women such as Catherine of Siena.

Robert Ackerman calculates that the prayers and devotions would take up 5 or more hours of the day, the remaining time being left free for meals and work, not to mention association with people outside for the purposes of counsel or even practicalities.

The ‘Anchoring Rule’ was a template that individuals were no doubt able to vary, but some such routine must have been essential to maintain mental and emotional balance, though it is the case that some recluses ran away or went mad.

The Anchorage is unlikely to have consisted of a simple cell as in a monastery: there could be two or more rooms, and perhaps a garden, and there are even instances of owning cattle. Julian had two servants, Mary and Sarah who would have taken care of practicalities such as shopping etc.

Evidence seems to indicate that many cities and towns in England were glad to support an anchorage: London at one time had 8. Some such as Richard Rolle [for a while] were sponsored by well-off individuals who might also leave money for them in their Wills. The Anchorite, in return, might give advice, spiritual direction or guidance, and would be expected to support the community by means of prayer. Margery Kempe writes an account of her visit to Julian in order to test her own visions which must have taken some head-scratching and prayer on Julian’s part, but evidently Margery was more than satisfied with the outcome.

JULIAN’S ‘REVELATIONS OF DIVINE LOVE.’

In 1670 Anglican Bishop Edward Stillingfleet viewed ‘Revelations’ as an example of:

‘the fantastic revelations of distempered brains; so highly regarded by the Roman Church a church that forbade the reading of scripture but and yet commended the blasphemous and senseless tittle-tattle of this hysterical gossip.’

Thomas Merton, on the other hand, describes the work as;

‘A coherent and, indeed systematically constructed corpus of doctrine.’

Its appearance as the first book in the series ‘Classics of Western Spirituality’ should convince anybody of its value, both as clear accounts of a series of profound spiritual experiences granted to a very special person, as well as inspired and interesting theology.

We know little enough of Julian herself other than what she tells us in her writing, and there have been scholarly disputes about practically every aspect of her life and work. We do not even know her original name.

It seems most likely that she was a lay woman of very deep faith, who may have lost a husband and child in early life but does not seem to have been a professed nun at the time of her visions. Our best guess is that she was able to read and write but, as she describes herself as a ‘simple unlearned creature,’ it seems most likely that she had no Latin. At the end of her book there is a ‘envoi’ from ‘the scribe who wrote this book down for Julian’ which should speak for itself.

She tells us that she prayed for three gifts: 1. participation in his passion; 2. a life-threatening illness, and 3. the grace of the triple wound; contrition, compassion and unbearable longing. She says she wanted to be one of those, with Mary Magdalene and Jesus’ mother, who witnessed the passion of Jesus:

‘I wanted to be one of them; to suffer alongside them, all I hoped for was to have a deeper awareness of Christ after this vision ...I did not ask to be shown anything else besides this until the time came that my soul left my body.’

She continues:

‘When I was 30 and a half years old, God sent me that illness I had asked for in my youth. For three days and three nights I lay in my bed, and on the fourth night I was given the Last Rites of Holy Church. Nobody expected me to last through the night, yet I lingered for another two days …

These wishes were granted to Julian on May 8th 1373 when, in a room in the presence of her mother and other attendants, her life was despaired of and the parish priest arrived to give her the last rights.

When, as was customary, the priest held a crucifix before her eyes Julian began to experience a series of 15 visions that lasted for another two days. Julian spent the next 20 years contemplating the meaning of these visions with which she had been entrusted, and there is a shorter and longer version of her treatise, of which the latter is generally preferred. There was a sixteenth vision 15 years later that informed her that the whole meaning of the previous ones had been to show her the love the Trinity felt for all creation, and that it was to be shared with all Christians.

There is one mention in the entire work of a visit and subsequent conversation with ‘a member of my religious community – a priest, which gives us the merest hint that at or sometime after the commencement of her ‘profession’ she may have joined or come under the supervision of a religious order, which is most likely to have been the local Benedictines: clearly she would have had a confessor.

Debates continue over when Julian wrote the book and whether she finished it, though the last section, 86, seems to bring it to a perfectly satisfactory conclusion. Many translations have been made from Middle English: the Penguin edition was published in 1966, and is reasonably comprehensible but the introduction is excellent and succinct.

A lot of the conventional theology, particularly on the Trinity, owes much to Augustine, but it seems most likely that she gathered other theological insights at second hand, through sermons, devotional works and individual counsel, but there is a caucus of quite original theology that is Julian’s own. Of particular interest is her frequent references to God and Christ as ‘mother’ and the out-workings of these passages are of a lot more than theological interest. The early accounts of her visions are really relational rather than theological, and even later on, when she becomes rather prolix at times, her intention towards the reader is spiritual rather than theological. The book is short and should be required reading for anybody interested in the English spiritual tradition, particularly because interest in Julian nowadays goes well beyond Christianity.

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**PRAYER** – Here is a way of praying for others derived from the prayer cards that are available from the Julian cell in Norwich;

THE WAY OF AWARENESS.

There are three simple steps.

STEP 1 Become aware that God has been, working through all time, and continues to work for healing of the world; and that our prayer is to be part of that work.

STEP 2 Hold the intercession request in your hand [perhaps have small pieces of paper with a name written on each.] The process doesn’t require special concentration or effort; simply the awareness of being for example, in the presence of a picture or of a sunset.

STEP 3 Put the slip to one side, and simply BE in God’s presence. We do not have to consciously BE in his presence on behalf of the other: what has already happened makes that clear.

Michael Ramsey emphasises that ‘intercession does not mean being clever, or even necessarily being aware of the particular needs in the situation we’re concerned about: That is for God. ‘We are to fill the water-butts with water; God makes the wine: we are to remove the stone: ‘Lazarus come forth!’ belongs to him.’