**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

19TH APRIL ALPHEGE

21ST APRIL ANSELM OF CANTERBURY

23RD APRIL GEORGE

24TH APRIL MELITUS

Alphege (953-1012) is the other Archbishop of Canterbury who became a martyr, but rather differently from Thomas a Becket.

He was a monk at Deerhurst near Gloucester, and then as a hermit in Somerset, gathering a few young disciples around him who admired his holiness of life. He sent many of these to Dunstan’s Reformed Bath Abbey, and he was eventually called out of his solitary life to become Abbot of Bath. In 984 he was created Bishop of Winchester where he was particularly well loved and revered because of his generous almsgiving and devotion, and in 1005, very much against his will, he was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury.

Meanwhile the Danes had continued to raid and pillage, and Ethelred the Redeless [= poorly counselled] even sent Alphege to negotiate with them. To the latter’s credit Sweyn Forkbeard was converted, and took no further part in the raiding, but fresh parties of Danes overran most of southern England and eventually got into Canterbury, taking hostage several magnates and the Archbishop, who refused to pay the £3,000 ransom placed upon his head by his captors, who had released the other prisoners once their ransoms were paid. Alphege forbade anybody to even raise the price of his release, which enraged the Danes so much that during a drinking bout that ran out of control they pelted him with large ox bones and heads, until one of him bludgeoned him on the head with an axe.

During Becket’s ordeal at Canterbury Cathedral, he called upon Alphege as the first martyr of Canterbury, and there are still churches named after him today.

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Anselm of Canterbury [1033-1109] – Within a century England was graced with three illustrious archbishops: Lanfranc, Anselm and Thomas a Becket who is, however, probably more famous as the Martyr than for any theological or spiritual achievements he may have left to posterity. Anselm was almost an over-achiever in both fields, not that he avoided the quarrels and disputes with monarchy that brought Thomas to his death, but he was of a very different personal stamp, and his primarily philosophical and theological writings show him to be a courageous innovator; his lesser known meditations and prayers display his intense love of God, and his letters show him to have been a humble man and a generous friend and colleague. He has been described on this website as a 5-star saint.

One example of the last is that when his Proslogion, a major work, was criticised by a former pupil, Gaunilo, Anselm wrote a reply, expressing delight that such an insightful critic had raised questions which Anselm was able to answer satisfactorily, to the extent that he insisted on publishing Gaunilo’s comments and his own response as an annex to his original treatise.

He was born in Aosta, Northern Italy, in 1033, and after his mother’s death quarrelled with his father and left home. As a wandering scholar he travelled for several years around France, until he finally in 1059 attached himself to the monastery at Bec in Central Normandy, which had only been founded 25 years previously: Herluin, its founder, was still abbot, and the Prior, Lanfranc [1005-89] was in process of establishing a very prestigious school.

According to Anselm’s principal biographer, Eadmer, Lanfranc was already gathering the best ‘clerks’ around him by virtue of his fame as a teacher, and that Anselm became Lanfranc’s most intimate of his disciples. At the age of 27, after a good deal of soul-searching, he became a monk, and in 1063 when Lanfranc left Bec to take over at St Etienne at Caen, Anselm was left as Principal Teacher and the ambience there changed, because not only would he not encourage students from outside the monastery, but he wished to foster the spiritual as well as the intellectual gifts of the monks at Bec.

Before the foundation of the oldest universities the only centres of advanced learning were these monastic schools, which depended for their prestige on the quality and fame of their teachers, and it was customary for any aspiring scholar to search for and find his teacher in this way. Just a generation later the embryonic University of Paris was sufficiently formed for Peter Abelard to have had a lectureship but found himself in conflict with an opponent from one of these monastic schools. With the ascendancy of scholastic theology, of which Anselm could be thought of as its pioneer, the universities began to attract the best teachers, and the principal monastic orders simply ran hostels for their own students alongside, so that Anselm’s generation represents the end of an era in student life.

His prayers and meditations had already acquired quite a broad readership, although they were probably his earliest works, and tend to be overlooked in favour of his later and more philosophical and theological writings, but they contain passages of rare poetic beauty, and display an intense devotion which approach the mystical [e g in parts of Meditation 14]. His Latin style, which we lose in translation, is described as equally beautiful, although in the later works he opts for simplicity of expression.

Anselm’s first major work, the ’Monologion’, came at the request of his students who begged him to write his teachings about meditation for them. The second in a long series of major philosophical/theological works was the ‘Proslogion,’ in which Anselm succeeded in reducing the various arguments he had previously deployed into one strong one. In 1078, while still in process of writing ‘Proslogion,’ he became Abbot of Bec, and by 1085 these first two works were being read all over France as well as in England and even Rome.

After the courtesy of his debate with Gaunilo, Roscelin, a philosophy teacher at various French schools, determinedly misrepresented Anselm’s views, and seemed to be linking his name with heresies that the latter utterly disowned, to the extent that he wrote ‘On the Incarnation of the Word’ to make his own position clear.

In 1093, much against his will and inclination, Anselm was chosen to succeed Lanfranc as Archbishop of Canterbury, having visited England on business of the monastery’s lands. He disliked admin, although he undertook it conscientiously, and on one occasion he wrote to the Abbess of Shaftesbury: ‘I am so harassed in the archbishopric that if it were possible to do so without guilt I would rather die than continue in it.’

As Archbishop, Anselm found himself confronted with many of the problems that came to a head between Henry II and Thomas. William the Conqueror’s successor, William Rufus had kept the archbishopric vacant for the four years since Lanfranc’s death so that he could enjoy its considerable revenues. There was also a growing tendency for kings and emperors to appoint their own bishops without papal authority, and these could often be relatives or favourites with little or no care taken as to their suitability for such holy office.

On the surface this problem manifested itself when Anselm was appointed, and while it was understood that the king was entitled to bestow the temporalities of a bishop’s office – lands, etc, the pastoral regalia – ring and staff, were at the disposal of the Pope or Archbishop to release. When King William had attempted to present Anselm with these holy regalia at his consecration, Anselm’s resistance at the time spoke more of his reluctance to take up the office than any concern with the broader picture. When he came to understand the political ramifications of what had been attempted, however, Anselm wished to have the matter settled by the Pope himself.

To poison relations further, these temporalities related to the archbishop’s feudal responsibilities to the King, and when William Rufus requested £1,000 to assist in a campaign in Normandy Anselm refused because raising such a sum would harm his tenants. On the other hand, he solicited the King for the relief of the churches which were daily going to ruin, for the revival of the Christian Law which was being violated in many ways, and for the reform of morals which every day and in every class of people showed too many corruptions.’

When William returned from Normandy Anselm requested permission to visit Rome in order to receive his pallium of office from the Pope, but William did not wish to recognise Pope Urban II, and the majority of English bishops supported him! In 1095 he was finally allowed to go, and an uneasy peace ensued, but in 1097 William was complaining about the poor quality of troops Anselm had provided for a campaign in Wales under these feudal obligations. Eventually Anselm opted for discretion and stayed away from England until William’s rather nasty death in 1100.

Whilst out of England Anselm completed his next major work: ‘Why God Became Man,’ living peaceably in the Alps, his home country, and started work on ‘On the Virgin Conception’ and ‘Original Sin.’

At the Council of Bari in 1098’ The Pope had asked him to speak, because some Greek theologians wished to discuss the various matters that had led to the schism with Rome in 1054, which had had as much to do with politics as with doctrine. Given some time to prepare his speech Anselm attempted to persuade the Greeks regarding the thorny ‘filioque’ question; that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Son as well as from the Father. Unsuccessful in bringing the Greeks round to the western view, he nonetheless found himself sufficiently interested to write ‘On the Procession of the Holy Spirit’ really in order to clarify his own thinking, completing it in 1102.

One of the principal bones of contention between the Eastern and Western Churches centred on whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, as maintained in the East, or from both the Father and the Son, as most Western Churches believe. ‘Filioque’ is Latin for ‘And from the Son.’

When Anselm returned to England at the accession of Henry I he was welcomed with open arms, but it soon became clear that the peace would not last. When he requested leave once more to get the matter of the appointment of bishops settled in Rome, he discovered that Urban’s successor, Pascal II had come to a less than satisfactory compromise with the King. Anselm acceded to this fudge for reasons of obedience to the Pope, but he had been promised that Paschal would excommunicate Henry, and, indeed, Anselm himself had threatened to do so twice. Initially welcomed once more on his final return, Anselm was, by this time, old and weak, he soon suffered a serious physical collapse, and was unable to complete his treatise ‘On Concordia.’

As a theologian and philosopher Anselm addressed some matters pertaining to the philosophy of religion that are still in dispute today: he wrote clearly and with precise logic to the extent that future university teachers found it impossible to reduce his written works into lecture-size packages. He was also limited in the resources at his disposal, having, besides Jerome’s Latin Bible, the Latin Fathers such as Augustine and Jerome himself, Bede, and Anselm’s own contemporary, Bernard of Clairvaux. He had little or no access to Greek scholarship even in translation, although his own world view was validated by the predominantly Platonic mindset that came through these resources.

Today Anselm is best-known for his attempt to prove the existence of God by reason, more than a century before Thomas Aquinas, who knew his opinions. The other construct that modern theologians remember is his theory of the atonement, which is expressed clearly in ‘Why God Became Man:’ it goes something like this:

When Eve scrumped the apple a sin of disobedience was committed which, while it could be forgiven through God’s mercy, a debt of honour came to exist between humanity and God which could not be satisfied in any way other than the incarnation of God’s Son, in order to offer his own life back to God on behalf of humanity, which God accepted as the only way possible for the obligation to be settled. The Student, a literary device, had wondered why an angel could not have effected the same transaction, but an angel is sinless, and in any case not human. Anselm goes on to state that such a sacrifice on the part of God’s Son requires a reward [feudal etiquette] but that Jesus, being sinless, had no need for one, so that he generously requested that it be bestowed on humanity.

In the next generation Abelard put forward the idea that Christ came to earth and lived and died simply as an example to humanity of how to live; a theory that was condemned in his own time, but which has attracted interest recently, but while there is a tendency to set the rival theories up as a debate between Anselm and Abelard, such a debate did not take place in reality.

Anselm’s logical attempt to prove God’s existence was different from the traditional method of trying to prove it from the observation that there had to be some intelligent mind behind the creation of the universe, but it has been found to fall purely on logical grounds, principally because of its reliance on platonic ontology. In modern philosophy of religion, moreover, Anselm would be seen to be exceeding his brief by going so far as to prove by the same logic that God exists precisely in the way that Christians believe him to!!!

The man we encounter in all of Anselm’s writings as well as in his life as seeker, teacher and prelate, is somebody who put himself entirely and unstintingly at the service of God.

The ‘Major works’ are translated together in the Oxford World Classics series, on which this article is based.

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George [D304] Patron Saint of England, Venice, Genoa, Portugal, Aragon Lithuania and Georgia, and canonised in the Anglican, Roman, eastern and Coptic churches. He is one of the fourteen ‘Holy Helpers’ whose cult spread from the Rhine Valley through Hungary and Sweden, but he is actually thought to have been martyred at Lydda, now Lod, in Israel in 304 during the persecutions under Dioclesian.

The story about the dragon may date from crusading times and was probably based on a confusion with depictions of the armoured angel Michael slaying the Devil.

Most nations seem to acquire their patron saints at second hand but not only is George a ‘pre-loved’ nonentity based on a mistake, but he’s one we share with polities with which we have occasionally been at war: if Shakespeare’s Henry V had really asked his troops to ‘Cry England, Harry and St George,’ the poor saint might have had to scratch his head or toss a coin!

Why do we not adopt an authentically holy and English saint, when there are a few, even named George; George Herbert, for one, or Bishop George Bell for another?

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MELITUS [D624] – Was sent over to England in 601 by Gregory the Great, heading up a back-up for Augustine, who created him Bishop of the East Saxons, the diocese reaching back to London, which became its seat with Ethelbert of Kent, overlord of the East Saxons, having built the first church there, dedicated to St Paul. You may recall that it was Ethelbert who welcomed Augustine’s original party in 595.

Gregory had sent a letter with Melitus instructing him to rededicate the pagan temples as churches, and to retain pagan festival dates for Christian purposes. This must have given the Saxons the impression that there was a certain porousness among the cults, and even a nodding acquaintance with the Old Testament should have reminded missionaries that God had required the destruction of pagan places of worship and paraphernalia for practical as well as cultic purposes in order to separate the new from the old.

Ethelbert’s nephew, Sabert, ruled the East Saxons, but at his death his three sons fell out with Melitus because, in their own words ‘We won’t get into that font, because we don’t see the point of it, but we want to be strengthened by the [white] bread.’ Under the circumstances their misunderstanding of the importance of baptism could be excused, but Melitus steamed in and proclaimed sternly that if they refused the water of life they were unfit for the bread of life, at which point the brothers drove him into exile, and can you blame them?

The whole episode is a textbook case of how not to evangelise. Gregory the Great’s correspondence with Augustine shows that the latter needed firm guidance in situ, which is why, in 601, Melitus was chosen as leader of a pastoral back-up for Augustine, who obviously needed it; and his intention would surely have been to retain as much of the old cult as possible in order to facilitate the conversion experience. Melitus, however, seems to have lacked Gregory’s pastoral skills: missionaries cannot wander into a foreign country and simply bellow the odds even if Old Testament heroes got away with it. Of course we do tend to pass on what we are given, so the church can extenuate some of her excesses in the missionary field by claiming that it was how she herself was evangelised, but it is hardly a respectful or diplomatic way to deal with rulers.

Melitus stayed in Gaul until In 619, having made his weary way back as far as Canterbury, he managed to succeed Laurence whom he had originally outranked as Archbishop, rather, one suspects, in ‘buggins’ turn’ but he appears to have achieved little enough in his five years in office. The best we hear of him is that when Canterbury caught fire Melitus had his gout-wracked person carried out to where the fire was threatening some wooden houses, and that his prayers apparently turned the wind and saved them, so God did have a purpose for him in his mysterious way!

Frankly Melitus hardly distinguished himself either pastorally or theologically, neither did he appear to have much going for him either as a teacher or peace-maker, so to name a London clergy training establishment after such a ‘fait-neant’ absentee bishop seems a little inauspicious to say the least.