22ND JUNE ALBAN

The Venerable Bede’s account of St ALBAN is the only written witness we have of a Roman Christian Church in England.

The few facts are these: in 287 Alban, a soldier, was protecting a priest from local persecution and became converted through his way of life and habit of prayer. When the local authorities heard of this they sent soldier’s to Alban’s home in search of the priest, but Alban placed himself into their hands rather than betraying his guest.

The local governor was infuriated when he discovered Alban’s deceit and had him whipped, but to no effect. When Alban declared himself a Christian the governor lost his temper and, when Alban not only refused to worship the pagan gods, but assured him that these gods were devils, the governor sentenced him to death.

On the road to execution there was a river outside Verulamium – present-day St Alban’s, but the bridge into the town was so crowded with on-lookers that the river couldn’t be crossed: the story is that Alban prayed to heaven and the waters parted, at which point the executioner dropped his sword and instantly converted.

When the party finally reached the place of execution another soldier struck Alban’s head from his shoulders, but his eyes fell out of their sockets and landed on the ground beside the head. Two named companions of Alban were also martyred, but there had now been enough miracles to alter the governor’s attitude, so that he ceased the persecution.

This is all we have, and most of the miracles serve to validate and vindicate a local saint once he has caught the imagination of a community. Bede’s simple account of Alban’s life demonstrates his compassion open-mindedness, loyalty and courage: that’s the stuff of a saint!

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23RD JUNE ETHELDREDA/AUDREY

With a church dedicated to St ETHELDREIDA down the Fulham Palace road have you ever wondered who she might have been, or perhaps you know already.

The long name is a Latinisation of the Anglo-Saxon Aethelthryth, mercifully known for centuries as Audrey: in fact, our word ’tawdry’ is an abbreviation of St Audrey, which refers to the shabby quality of merchandise available at her shrine.

Audrey was the daughter of king Anna and was given in marriage to a first husband who died before its consummation. Thereafter she was ‘given’ to King Ecgfrith, whom Bede describes as noble and full of religion and good works.

Audrey lived with her royal husband for 12 years without losing her virginity, because, as Bede puts it, she wished to serve Christ, ‘the king on high,’ and be released from worldly cares. Bede relates how Ecgfrith attempted to induce Bishop St Wilfred with ‘many lands and much money’ to persuade Audrey to fulfil her marital ‘duty,’ because he knew that ‘She loved no man more.’

With very great difficulty Audrey convinced her husband to allow her to become a nun, and her veil was presented to her by Wilfred. After a year Audrey founded her own double monastery on the isle of Ely, where her life of prayer, asceticism and self-sacrifice became an example to many other ‘virgins,’ and as abbess of a double foundation she had power over monks and nuns alike.

Audrey died in 678, within living memory of Bede himself: Wilfred and the physician Cynefryth, who treated a tumour that plagued Audrey, and probably killed her. Both Wilfred and Cynefryth testified to Bede that, 16 years after Audrey’s death, her sister, who took over as Abbess, wanted to re-inter Audrey in a place of honour, and in a stone sarcophagus, that when her body was exhumed, it had not deteriorated; the linen wraps were fresh, and the tumour healed, leaving only a tiny scar. This was taken as final proof that Audrey had remained a virgin, ‘unsullied by the touch of man’ which had not previously been generally believed.

The cult of Audrey grew very rapidly after her death: people who rested their heads on the stone had their eye problems healed or ameliorated: demons were driven out of others etc.

Frankly, the story not only illustrates Audrey’s determination to follow her calling, but shows Ecgfrith to have been every bit the noble and religious man that Bede describes: this was an age in which women were ‘given’ in marriage largely for motives of family alliances, and the notion that a woman, however exalted her status, could resist her husband in this way was extraordinary, although Kathleen Jones relates that, having lost his wife to ‘The King on high,’ by Wilfrid’s agency, Ecgfrith gained sweet revenge by getting his See of York halved, which the great prince of the church would have felt as a particular indignity.

There are so many angles from which to come at this story that it’s really most prudent to leave it to you to work out your own attitude or even its relevance to your own spiritual formation.

It is right and just that nowadays a crime of rape within marriage exists, and it is also true to say that royal and noble women in many ages were bartered in marriage to create alliances between families with their compliance in quite unsuitable or inappropriate matches taken for granted, so that if such women found it expedient to dedicate themselves as ‘brides of Christ’ it may well have been about the only available alternative. From a sociological or historical point of view, then, Audrey was playing her poor hand as best she could: as Abbess of Ely she could have a good deal of power and independence.

There are several important treatises on virginity from the church fathers; most notably by Ambrose, though Jerome’s writings on the subject belong most appropriately to the realm of psychotherapy. What is distasteful in the early church as now, is that men, however holy and wise, take it upon themselves to prescribe how women should receive and nurture their God-given sexuality, that is, of course, to assume that all women, and men, for that matter, are all gifted with it in the same manner and to the same extent.

If you follow the ‘calendar’ there are many women saints who were better able to elucidate their preference for virginity on purely theological and spiritual grounds, so that the safest and surely the most ethically sound way to understanding this difficult subject – especially for men – is to read the works of Gertrude or the Beguines.

What can cause confusion in the writings of some female mystics is the apparently sexual nature of some of their visions: For us Anglicans with our feet planted firmly on the ground and struggling with other ethical issues of the day, perhaps the wisest and humblest path is to pass by what may simply turn out to be a temptation to idle curiosity.

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24TH JUNE THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

The BIRTH OF JOHN the BAPTIST is recounted only in Luke ch1 v5ff. For understandable reasons it is preferable to celebrate his birth rather than his squalid death, which, far from being that of a martyr, functions, perhaps, almost as an acted parable illustrative of the degeneration into which Israel had fallen by his time.

The actual circumstances of John’s birth are less important than prophecy to Zachariah regarding John’s future role: Elijah comes up time and again in the Gospels and we hardly notice; partly because he is a far more significant figure in Judaism than in Christianity; and because we tend to overlook the tradition that Jesus and his disciples refer to, that the coming of the Messiah would be prefaced by the reappearance of Elijah; [ Mat ch11 v2ff;] Jesus proclaims John as the ‘Elijah that was to come:’

The other important passage surrounding the birth is the ‘Benedicite’ that John’s father sings when ‘filled with the Holy Spirit.’ When we sing this ourselves in church, it’s worth remembering its original context, and that Zachariah is addressing the infant John.

An interesting matter of speculation is how and why John came to reject the priesthood, which he would have inherited as Zachariah’s son. We can assume that, after the prophecy from the Angel Gabriel, Zachariah would have retained a pretty high estimation of how his son might turn out, which would, no doubt, have coloured John’s upbringing. The whole point of John’s future prophetic ministry, however, was to cut away the presumption that ‘children of Abraham’ would enjoy righteous standing with God per se, and to detach fellow Jews from the temple cultus served by his father, the priest. Put quite simply, John’s rejection of his father’s heritage as priest is undergirded by the whole theological significance of his prophetic ministry.

And this significance can hardly be understated. Those who study the Gospels carefully would understand that the Pharisees’ aims were not as ill-intentioned as we might think from just listening to readings in church. They were actually a democratic lot who sought to separate the concept of righteousness from the temple cult, with its administration by a class of priests and elders who had, in their judgement, thrown in their hand with the Roman oppressors. By exhaustive study of the Torah - the first five books of our Bible – they had worked out that if Jewish people observed any number of rules and regulations, they could stay on the right side of God. Not surprisingly, as teachers can, many of them got above themselves, but in intention they were nearer to Jesus than the occasional Gospel snippet half-heard and – understood in church might lead us to believe.

John had taken one step further, by proposing baptism as a means of starting afresh with God, after which he cuts to the chase and exhorts his hearers to lead a life of what St Francis de Sales would have described as ‘ordinary goodness,’ rather than trying to adhere to the 613 stipulations on the Pharisee’s agenda for righteousness: in other words, John makes the prospect of salvation accessible to the lowliest in society.

Certainly his main aim is to get his hearers away from slavish dependence on the temple cult, and into a state of ethical and spiritual readiness to receive the Messiah. The rest we know: Jesus declares that the temple cannot last forever, and that faith in him and his teachings will be all that God requires of them.

The early chapters of Luke are written in an almost self-conscious imitation of the Old Testament; and, from a literary standpoint, these early chapters are Luke’s narrative way of connecting the Gospel with the prophetic tradition that the early church imagined had specifically predicted the birth of Jesus. Much of what John has to say is held in common with Isaiah, and there seems to be nothing either in the Magnificat or the Benedicite that would have been new to a pious Jew familiar with the prophets.

In earthly terms John can seem a tragic figure, and Jesus’ epitaph on him in Matthew ch11 could be read as damning him with faint praise, but, assuming they were cousins; that they shared a ministry of baptism for a while; that John not only predicted and pointed Jesus out as the Messiah; that John ‘s baptism of Jesus opened up a new phase in Jesus’ ministry; that John was content to fade into relative obscurity while Jesus attracted larger crowds, including some of his own previous disciples; that Jesus doesn’t appear to have commenced his own public ministry until after John’s arrest: all these indicate the esteem, respect and affection in which John was held by Jesus.

Walter Wink, in his article on John in the Oxford Companion to the Bible writes this:

‘The evangelists each employ the traditions about John in the service of the proclamation about Jesus: each handles him differently, but all see him as the one who stands at the beginning of the Gospel story, demanding of the hearer a beginner’s mind and the jettisoning of all previous securities, so that a new word can be heard.’

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27TH JUNE CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA [376-444]

CYRIL of ALEXANDRIA was canonised in honour of the Christological stand he took and maintained as to the ‘indivisibility of the two natures,’ and the status of Mary as ‘Theotokos – God-bearer,’ as opposed to ‘Christotokos – Christ-bearer.’

Robert Atwell, author of ‘Celebrating the saints’ and ‘Celebrating the seasons,’ taught Patristics at Cambridge for six years; was an Anglican priest working in London, and spent his final years as a monk; so his authority in these matters is beyond doubt. Atwell states of Cyril:

Cyril’s writings reflect his outstanding qualities as a theologian. They are marked by precision in exposition, accuracy in thought and skill in reasoning.

During Cyril’s early childhood his uncle Theophilus became Patriarch of Alexandria, and under his guidance Cyril was well educated and became familiar with contemporary Christian writings,

In 403 Cyril accompanied his uncle to Constantinople and at a synod Theophilus demonstrated his own violent, underhand and deceitful modus operandi. The previous year Theophilus had been summoned to a synod under the presidency of Archbishop John Chrysostom, at which a number of monks had alleged that Theophilus had persecuted them as Origenists, had led a band of soldiers and armed servants to burn their dwellings and ill-treat those he had captured.

At the synod in 403 Cyril arrived with 29 of his own bishops, and plotted with Chrysostom’s opponents, among his uncle’s other supporters, to get John deposed.

Having adopted his uncle’s strong-arm tactics, in 412, following the death of his uncle, he managed, after a riot, to get himself elected Patriarch.

Alexandria had been founded by Alexander the Great in late 4th century b c e, and became a prosperous commercial centre, and one of much culture and learning. The original inhabitants were pagan, but the city attracted many thousands of Jews, who enriched it and brought their own religion. The ornament of the city was a Jew named Philo, who set up what was the world’s greatest library there. Later a Christian community developed, and with it a tradition of original and clear-eyed theology, from Clement in the 2nd century, to the great but controversial Origen; Athanasius, and Cyril’s own teacher of theology, Didymus the Blind. Hence there were three large communities: pagans, Jews and Christians, who waged frequent turf wars.

A further bone of contention was the struggle among the five major centres of church leadership for prestige and eminence: Constantinople, Rome, Alexandria Antioch and Jerusalem. Each had its own cultural and theological tradition, and, naturally enough, rivalries existed amongst them. The unspoken base line in much of Cyril’s subsequent theological disputes was his wish to establish and maintain the predominance of his own city of Alexandria above that of Antioch.

Cyril commenced his reign as Patriarch by closing down the churches of one Christian minority and confiscating their goods. There were frequent inter-communal riots among the pagans, Jews and Christians which were seriously exacerbated by increasingly intense conflict between Cyril and the Prefect of Alexandria, Orestes. As a result Cyril managed to exile a significant section of the Jewish community after a massacre of Christians for which a minority of Jews were undoubtedly responsible.

Cyril may not have been directly responsible for the lynching of the leading philosopher and scientist Hypatia, but the atmosphere in which this atrocity took place was of his making. And probably occurred because of factional enmities among Christians themselves.

Cyril’s next campaign was against Nestorius, the new Patriarch of Constantinople. In fairness Nestorius was an extremely unattractive character who managed to alienate most of the factions in Constantinople that he should have known to keep onside but he was an outsider who clearly did not heed advice. Within a few days of his accession, he had ordered the demolition of the one Arian church which wiser heads had kept open for the benefit of Gothic military and diplomatic visitors to the city: this was bad enough, but the fire spread and burned down a large area of its quarter! Next he upset the monks, who could as easily start a riot as maintain moral leadership in town: then he insulted the empress. Mike Aquilina does a magnificent hatchet job on Nestorius in his ‘Villains of the early church,’ concluding that by the time of his deposition the only Nestorian around anywhere was probably Nestorius himself!!!

Perhaps, then, we could cut Cyril a bit of slack, were it not for his pre-existing form as an enforcer and the fact that it was by means of extensive bribery that he eventually gained the upper hand. Furthermore, this is not the time and place for chapter and verse on his ‘dirty tricks,’ because the disputes within the church between 428 and 451 were truly ‘Byzantine,’ in both senses of the word. Suffice it to say that if Armando Iannucci had been around at the time we should have had a wonderful box set! [For those sufficiently interested, details can be found in J Stevenson ‘Creeds, councils and controversies 366-461 published by SPCK.]

The rub is that, as every reputable commentator agrees, Cyril was a brilliant theologian who is named ‘Doctor of the church’ ‘Seal of the fathers’ and a saint; all this for his undoubted commitment to maintaining the line of Catholic orthodoxy against the threat of confusions, misunderstandings and a particularly difficult political situation in which a weak emperor remained very much the tool of the women who surrounded and influenced his decisions at court. If he was a bigot, he was no extremist, and towards the end of his life he was able to bring some of his opposition onside by means of compromise.

The purely theological controversies have been characterised as the protagonists talking past one another. Cyril’s real sin is that he used very abstruse Christological difference in language between himself and Nestorius as an excuse to lapse into ‘Dog whistle’ theology by whipping up public sentiment, maintaining that his opponent’s honorific for Mary was ‘Christotokos’ ‘Christ-bearer’ as opposed to ‘Theotokos’ God-bearer, which could be twisted as carrying the implication that if she were not the ‘Mother of God’ then maybe Jesus was not ‘Son of God’ which was enough to fire up the mob. This in itself only resulted from the monks of Constantinople entrapping Nestorius with a trick question about the theological status of Mary!

The reality is that both protagonists were profoundly flawed individuals, trying, as best they could, however, to formulate language of sufficient precision to avoid these mistakes and misinterpretations. Had both parties debated with courtesy and goodwill some, at least, of the subsequent schisms could have been avoided: as it was, Cyril would have been an ideal inquisitor a thousand years later.

Additional complications arose when Cyril, in his efforts to upstage the emperor and his female ‘managers’, got the Pope involved in his web of alliances, when the latter would willingly have left the outcome of these debates to Constantinople: seemingly endless tomes, letters and anathemas winged their way from one centre to another, and at Ephesus, the epicentre of Marian tradition, two councils took place; one in favour of Cyril, the other [minority] supporting Nestorius, the results of both being reported simultaneously to the emperor who dithered as usual, arresting both protagonists. Nestorius was deposed and exiled, while Cyril returned in triumph to Alexandria.

Cyril was canonised on account of his undoubted theological achievements, as understood, however, only among that majority of Christians world-wide who accept the council of Chalcedon [451] to have put the lid soundly on Christian orthodoxy.

When we remember and pray for Christians in the Middle East, the Caucuses, the Indian sub-continent and parts of north-east Africa who are suffering discrimination and persecution today, the vast majority of these did not, and still do not, accept Chalcedon.

Those of us who value theology above ethics may find it possible to disregard or ignore Cyril’s methods, in the interests of what passes for church unity. Some small reparations were made some centuries later when parts of the schism were re-introduced into communion with the Roman church.

The last word should probably go to Bernard McGinn, perhaps the greatest recent authority on spirituality and mysticism in studies of church history, who writes:

‘A good number of fourth- and fifth-century doctors strike us as intransigent, and sometimes even immoral in their political activities … John Henry Newman made the remark that while he knew that Cyril was a saint, nothing obliged him to say that he was a saint in 412 … It is only if we insist that the doctors should all be ‘plaster saints’, free from the limitations of their age and their personal faults, that these admissions need trouble us unduly.’

Discuss.