**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

29TH APRIL CATHERINE OF SIENA

30TH APRIL PANDITA RAMABAI

1ST MAY PHILLIP & JAMES

2ND MAY ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA

CATHERINE OF SIENA (1347-80) – Catherine is one of the four women with the honorific ‘Doctor of the Church’, together with Hildegard, Teresa of Avila and Teresa of Lisieux, all of whom were enclosed Religious: Catherine is the only lay woman among them.

She and her twin brother Stefano Benincasa were born the 23rd and 24th of 25 children to a prosperous guild dyer Giacomo and his wife Lapa. Like Hildegard Catherine was always of a pious disposition and at the age of 6, while she and Stefano were enjoying a sunset near their home in the Street of the Dyers, she received a vision of Christ with his hand raised in blessing,[recalled later, in adult life] which her brother failed to register. From this moment on Catherine decided to be a saint and dedicated the rest of her life to God and proceeded to put herself through all the austerities and discipline of an adult Religious, with exhausting prayers, vigils, fasts, flagellations etc, to the extent that the family became alarmed and tried to restrain her.

For the little girl, ‘the Man with the Child in her Eyes’ was Jesus, and in her secret devotion she transformed the family members around her into disciples. As a teenager she cut off her hair when the prospect of marriage loomed with a widowed brother-in-law, so that her parents took her in hand and compelled her to do work about the house as a punishment. To her father’s credit, however, once he realised that his daughter might have a real vocation, he allocated her a very small room under the kitchen where she could pursue her life of prayer and contemplation.

The Benincasa home, which can still be visited in Siena, [but has really become a historically meaningless shrine] is at the bottom of a hill on which the dark, freezing barn-like church of San Domenico was and still is part of a Dominican priory, and Catherine would watch the friars going about their business and longed to be one. In time, by means of tears, blandishments and some strategy she was accepted into a tertiary order of Dominican lay women known as ‘Mantelatte, usually spinsters and widows who wore the Dominican habit and spent their time attending to the sick and the poor. Initially they were very reluctant to accept her, and for a while she completely failed to participate in their ministry.

At some time in her late teens, however, Catherine underwent another serious encounter with Jesus, who seems to have made it clear, by whatever means, that devotion is not solely a matter between the individual and himself, but that it must necessarily involve sharing his love with the world around her; so she started attending family meals and gradually adjusted to living in her community, and at last took to working with her 0rder stopping at nothing, throwing herself into work with all kinds of needy people. Regardless of safety she tended plague victims during the outbreak of 1374, and acquired a reputation as a holy woman.

One of the Mantelatte, a woman named Andrea, suffered growths around her breast which issued such a foul odour that nobody could bear to approach her except Catherine. In order to transform her repulsion into compassion, she placed her mouth and nose right into the wound, she drained the puss into a bowl and took a mouthful; strains of Francis kissing the leper’s sores. It is reported that later Catherine experienced a vision of Christ opening his breast for her to imbibe his blessing.

In both these instances of what we might think of as spiritual excess or even pathology, Catherine and Francis had in common issues of serious guilt and self-loathing: both had undergone a profound spiritual experience, and Stefano, Catherine’s twin, had died, leaving her with the intense survival guilt that one twin usually suffers at the loss of the other. Furthermore, as a little girl well down the family pecking order it is difficult to imagine that she would have attracted very much attention without making her presence felt by whatever means.

Kathleen Jones makes this insightful point because down the centuries people have thought of Catherine as suffering from mental illness, perhaps because of her gender, and Colt Anderson speaks of an eating disorder, which is an anachronism, but is it not the case that any child however well set up mentally, would, and probably should experience difficulties integrating such a profound spiritual shock into an immature psyche.

Catherine certainly had a prophetic calling, among other charisms, and many prophets – one might immediately think of Ezekiel – suffered from mental abnormalities; it almost goes with the turf. The point is that mental illness is no reason for disregarding what the sufferer may have to tell us.

As well as being jointly celebrated as patron saints of Italy, Catherine and Francis also have in common receipt of the stigmata, though Catherine prayed that, in her case, they should remain invisible: needless to say not everybody believed her.

Despite the famous allegories of good and bad government depicted in its main council chamber, we shouldn’t be surprised or disappointed to learn that 14th-century Siena had its riots and factional feuds, and Catherine involved herself as a peacemaker, moving on, in time, to try to intervene in the incipient wars between the Vatican and the ‘Papal states’, and Florence in particular.

Round about the age of twenty, Catherine learned to read and write, though apparently not to any advanced level, but from around 1370 she took up writing letters of advice, encouragement and reproof to anybody she felt needed her counsel, and once the church began taking her seriously, Raymond of Capua, a senior Dominican, was appointed her confessor and spiritual director, and she began to attract a group of disciples, including some distinguished churchmen, whom she called her ‘Famiglia’, including the Englishmen William Fleet.

She was invited to travel at first around Northern Italy, and then to Avignon and Rome and was respected by both Pope Gregory X and his successor Urban VI, who probably was himself mentally unbalanced.

There are no less than 384 of her letters that have come down to us, including her concern for a prostitute and a homosexual, beside senior clergy, prelates, rulers and the Pope himself. In about 1378 or before, Catherine wrote her book, known today as her ‘Dialogue,’ between God the Father and herself, which extends the well-tried philosophical dialogue format to an encounter with the divine.

After a life of physical austerities Catherine’s health had suffered, and her energetic pursuit of holiness and pastoral work did nothing to improve her health and, following a stroke she died in Rome on this day in 1380 at the tender age of 33.

Viewed from a purely worldly standpoint, it is possible to regard Catherine’s counsel and ‘diplomacy’ as a failure: politicians saw her as naïve and used her when it suited them, then dropped her abruptly. In respect of her efforts to bring the Papacy back to Rome, the election of Urban VI was an unmitigated disaster, and led to the French contingency left in Avignon claiming they had been intimidated by the Roman mob, and electing a French Pope, which began the Great Western Schism that went on until 1417.

The corruption and abuses in the church disturbed Catherine enormously and she did what she could, through her letters and counsel and occasionally some very stern rebukes to rulers, bishops, cardinals and even the Pope, in working out her prophetic calling. She often experienced stiff opposition and threats, and on one occasion narrowly escaped the assassin’s knife, but, as with many of the prophets, nobody seriously doubted Catherine as a woman of very great holiness.

She has suffered much criticism from many quarters since her death, pointing out, among other things, that her peace-making efforts at church and political level were unsuccessful; that her writing was unsystematic and inelegant; that she was naïve and uncompromising in her strictures to the powerful.

It may be that such critics have given up on trying to stagger through her ‘dialogue,’ which is understandable. The later Sr Suzanne Noffke, who made a lifetime study of Catherine of Siena, admits that you need a great deal of patience to read it, but that it is worth the considerable trouble to do so, and she was not wrong!

Many patristic and mediaeval tracts are quite tedious to read and frequently exhausting, but it is difficult to understand how Catherine became Doctor of the Church unless you do so. Kathleen Jones points out that, as the dyer’s daughter, her imagination is very visual, which helps at one level, but Catherine frequently repeats herself and phrases such as: ‘As I have told you before’ and ‘As I’ve already said’ can be infuriating.

What emerges from the ‘dialogue,’ however, is some good sacramental theology, some memorable guidance if nothing very original, but she has a very high doctrine of the church and the priesthood that would not have been lost on Roman prelates; but perhaps the outstanding insight comes when Catherine, aware that she may have delivered her rebukes in pride, self-will or self-righteous judgement, asks God for a steer on the subject, and it told her to work for humility and to pray with compassion for those in the church who are not living up to their calling, and to remind herself that on another day it could be her in the dock, but for the grace of God. There is a long chapter on obedience – in fact everything the Roman church could possibly need to keep the faithful contented.

Catherine lacked the structure of convent life on which to fall back, and unlike other outstanding women of the middle ages, she had neither a rich, noble family background, nor the advantage of a theological training, other than what she could glean from the Bible, Augustine, Bernard and whatever input she received from her spiritual director.

All this considered, we should not be surprised that very little was done officially to promote her canonisation until a Sienese bishop was elected Pope in 1456: she was created Doctor of the Church by Pope Benedict just recently.

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PANDITA RAMABAI 1853-1922 – Whether as a Hindu Brahmin or a Christian, ‘Mary’ Ramabai was a true saint.

She was born in the west of India where Marathi was her native language, but her father, Anant Shastri, was a renowned Sanskrit scholar, and, very unusually, he believed in the education of women, and it was Ramabai’s mother who taught her Sanskrit from the age of 8 to 16.

The family were well off, and Anant bought some land and set up an ashram, but had to sell it again because of debt. Henceforth they made a living as ‘purunikas’, travelling from village to village reading the scriptures: it was an act of merit for other castes to feed these holy people, or to give them clothing or money, so that they survived until in 1876-7 there arose a terrible famine in south India, and nobody had anything to spare. To quote Ramabai:

‘We had all the sacred learning necessary to lead an honest and religious life, but the pride of caste and superior learning and the vanity of life prevented us from stooping down to acquire some industry whereby we might have saved the precious lives of our parents.’

The family spent all its meagre funds on Temple Brahmins but:

‘Nothing came of all these futile efforts to please the gods – the stony images remained as hard as ever, and never answered our prayers.’

The last words of her father to Ramabai were:

‘Remember, my child, you are my youngest, my most beloved child; I have given you into the hands of our god; you are his, and to him alone you must belong, and serve him all your life.’

Ramabai witnessed the death from starvation of her parents and her sister, leaving only her brother and herself to survive and make their way to Calcutta where they joined a reformist organisation run by progressive Hindus drawing on Christian insights.

It was now that Anant Shastri’s wisdom and foresight in educating his daughter came to the rescue: she was appointed to lecture to the women’s groups on the duties of Hindu women and the scriptures, which she found increasingly uncongenial, because of the low status accorded to women in Hinduism: not only were they forbidden to read the Vedas but were taught that the only way to become liberated from millions of reincarnations was to worship and obey a husband for life: women’s status was even below that of demons! From now on Ramabai started lecturing at Calcutta University and began a campaign opposing child marriage and the caste system. It was here that she was first honoured with the title ‘Pandita [= female pandit]

Gradually things started to look up, with independence and an income, until the death of her beloved brother, at which point she married a Bengali school teacher and lawyer who was a Sudra, while Ramabai was a Brahmin. Sudras were not allowed to even hear, let alone read, the Vedas, on pain of the most gruesome punishments. The marriage, however, seems to have been a happy one, although her husband was annoyed by Ramabai’s occasional visits from a Baptist minister. A daughter, Manorama, [Heart’s delight] was born, but within two years the husband died of Cholera. And rather than stay in Calcutta with his family and be blamed for his death, she moved to Poona, her home territory, and a healthier environment for her young daughter; but for the rest of her life Ramabai wore the white sari and short hair of a Hindu widow.

Poona was the intellectual centre of Western India and Ramabai began lecturing on social issues, and in 1882 she gave evidence to the Hunter Commission on education when it visited Poona, recommending that the government should appoint female school inspectors because most men were against women’s education; and that an institution should be set up to train women in medicine because most would rather die than share their medical conditions with men.

It was in Poona that she had her first contact with the Wantage Sisters, by whose support and agency she travelled to England – in a 6-berth cabin which Europeans were unwilling to share with her! By means of the sisters arrangements were made for Ramabai to attend lectures in medicine at Oxford: she had cherished an ambition to become a doctor, but it was discovered that she had a hearing impairment.

At Wantage Ramabai was confirmed into the Church of England, rather in the Anglo-Catholic interest, or so it seemed, given the subsequent struggles she underwent with her mentor, Sister Geraldine, who dealt with her qualms about doctrine with the sensitivity of a sergeant major. Her experiences would read like an unholy sit-com were it not that they were handed down in deadly earnest: Ramabai had doubts about the trinity, the virgin birth, the resurrection, the 39 Articles and the ‘Athanasian’ Creed, and was puzzled at the exclusivity of the Church of England in relation to nonconformists when she read Catholic texts that made it clear to her that Anglicanism itself is deemed to be outside the Roman fold, and found the idea of subscribing to a national church repugnant to someone living under an imposed national rule.

Sr Geraldine told her that the Church was older than the Bible…’Let a woman learn in quietness and all subjection,’ and when ’blandishments’ failed Geraldine threw her to Canon Butler, of the Cowley Fathers, the Order’s spiritual director, who told her that these things had been the church’s doctrine for 1900 years[!] and when Ramabai protested that she should have a voice in choosing her new religion he barked: ‘Go and work or stay with the Brahmo’s or do what you like.’ He expressed his displeasure that she had not been going to confession and wrote to Sr Geraldine telling her that Ramabai had been spoiled with too much attention; ‘the Indian native is prone to vanity .’ Even poor Charles Gore was wheeled out but despite a screed of Bible texts Ramabai was not convinced.

Meanwhile she had been found work at Cheltenham Ladies’ College where she learned English, natural science, mathematics and Greek, while, in exchange, she taught Sanskrit at the boys’ college to students who wished to enter the Indian Civil Service. Geraldine roused the Bishops of Bombay and Lahore from their furlough so that they wrote to Ramabai to let her know that her reputation in India would be tarnished if it was ever known there that she had been teaching males: at the age of 27 Ramabai had already done so in India with her father’s approval so she was not best pleased to be patronised in this way.

When Ramabai came back to Wantage in the vacation, she discovered that her daughter had been trained to pray to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and she demanded that teaching about the Trinity should be excluded from her religious instruction!!! The sisters feared that Ramabai was falling into the hands of protestants! Sr Geraldine topped off her act by writing to Ramabai to complain that she was refusing to eat cakes at Wantage, presumably because she feared that they might contain animal fats.

A certain Miss Beale got the message: she found Ramabai ‘Very learned and thoughtful … We must not be anxious, but really trust God with that wonderful mind and character that he has fashioned for her. She will never, perhaps think exactly as we do but if she did she would not so well make a teacher for India.’

The more nonsense Ramabai received the more stubborn she became: ‘I am not bound to accept every word that falls down from the lips of priests and bishops: I have just freed myself from the yoke of the Indian priestly tribe … I must be allowed to think for myself. God has given me an independent conscience … You are all too learned, too spiritual, too wise, too faithful to your faith which you profess from your childhood, to understand my difficulties in accepting wholly the religion taught by you. You never had the experience of choosing another religion which was foreign to you, as I have.’

And again: ‘I am not free from all my caste prejudices, as you are pleased to call them. I like to be called a Hindu for I am one … My parents were Hindus; I have thoroughly imbibed within me all the good Hindu lessons of morality they taught me.’

Eventually she was refused communion with the sisters: she wrote to Miss Beale: ‘What matters to me if they will not let me communicate with them… The door of the universal church is not shut against me and I believe the Holy Catholic Church is not confined within the walls of the Anglican Church. I will take Jesus as my guru and study the Bible.’

Richard Simmons, in his great book ‘Far above Rubies,’ writes that: ‘The Wantage Sisters had caught a tartar,’ and it was best for everybody when, very soon after all this, Ramabai received an invitation from Dr Rachel Bodley, Dean of the Women’s Medical College at Philadelphia University to attend the graduation of her cousin, Anandibai Joshi, as the first female doctor in the United States.

All expenses were paid, and she sailed in 1886 with her 4-year-old daughter, and Dr Bodley took them into her house.

Once again Ramabai attended medical lectures and was still unable to hear them properly, so she surrendered that ambition, only to discover the work for which God had intended her. She underwent teacher training for kindergarten, and studied the various school systems available in America. She gradually came to understand that what she most wanted was to start a school for child widows.

Ramabai estimated that there were about 670,000 such child widows in India: girls barely out of puberty who were married to vastly older men. When the husbands died or divorced the girls were left entirely without provision, and had to exist either as slaves or prostitutes: once they had lost their looks they were left destitute.

It was at this point, too, that Ramabai wrote her best-known book ‘The high caste Indian woman,’ the first book by an Indian woman to be published in English. Ramabai needed funds to start up her project, and nothing was forthcoming from England, so that Dr Bodley wrote an encouraging introduction to the book and supported her appeal for funds. In time, 60 ‘Ramabai Associations’ were started, with multifaith committees, that agreed to fund the work for ten years, but insisted on no religious teaching or evangelism of any kind, either Christian or Hindu.

Mono, meanwhile, had been sent back to the Wantage Sisters, and it is to her mother’s enduring credit that she remained affectionately friendly with Geraldine until the latter’s death.

America did Ramabai untold good, and although she had resolved to lead a life of study while she was at Cheltenham, she followed her calling and introduced several American teaching methods into India. It was also at this time that many able and determined women were coming forward to assist her, from the various reform movements of the late nineteenth century. A star among these was Frances Willard, leader of the Prohibition Movement, who described Ramabai’s public speaking as: ‘Full of archness and repartee,’ and her disposition as; ‘Incarnate gentleness combined with celerity of apprehension, swiftness of mental pace and adroitness of logic.’ She and Ramabai corresponded until the end of her life.

It is not known which churches Ramabai attended in America, but she relaxed, veered rather towards Protestantism and came under the influence of a Pentecostal preacher who put her in touch with the emotional and spiritual, rather than the intellectual aspects of her faith. Later in her many institutions there arose what such people term a ‘revival, which she welcomed, but never found it necessary to participate.

At the end of 1888 Ramabai returned to India via California and lectured in Japan at the instigation of the Women’s Christian Temperance Movement. She brought with her a reader and five primers; a geography, a natural history textbook that she had written in Marathi, and 600 plates for illustrations.

Arrived in Bombay and reunited with Manorama, she was horrified to discover that her daughter had been sitting to her meals, eating with knives and forks, so that she recommenced the Indian way of using her fingers and sitting on the floor. Sr Eleanor wrote to Geraldine: ‘That she has lost her infidel tendencies is a matter of great thankfulness, but she is evidently in a fog of dissent. However it may be for us with gentleness to draw her with Catholicity. ‘

Within two months of her return Ramabai had opened a school for high-caste widows and orphans, with both boarders and day scholars, which she named Sharada Sadan, [the House of Wisdom]. At the end of the first three months there were 22 pupils some of whom had found their own way, such as Saraswati, a widow whose husband’s relatives had arranged to sell her into prostitution; and Yamuna, whose husband had been transported for the murder of a prostitute. At the end of 1890 the house was moved from Bombay to Poona, which was healthier and cheaper as well as being the centre of Hindu orthodoxy in South India. Here she was supported by a very capable Methodist minister who had visited England several times to protest against the opium trade, but who left later to set up her own shelter. Thereafter Ramabai’s institutions retained the merest whiff of Methodism including daily Bible readings.

Ramabai had maintained a daily prayer meeting each morning at school which attracted an ever-increasing caucus of students, and eventually the pretence of ‘laicité’ had to be abandoned, which caused trouble back in the U S with some of the steering committees withdrawing their support.

In 1896-7 a great famine occurred in India, and with the memories of her parents’ deaths Ramabai was bound to respond. Travelling around the central provinces she rescued hundreds of women and girls and lodged them in tents on rocky ground adjacent to the house. She published accounts of the famine in the Bombay Guardian which set up a relief fund. Some of the new arrivals were ‘jungly creatures’ whom the older girls helped to take in hand. Soon an American woman with experience in rehabilitating prostitutes arrived and a separate house was set up for her work.

In 1899 another famine arose nearer home, and Ramabai took in an estimated 1,350 women and girls, half of whom were under 14 and illiterate. These were settled at a house known as Mukti [house of Salvation]. Having provided food and shelter the priority was to set up a school for them, and 50 of the best students from the previous overflow were taken on as trainee teachers, working with their books in the morning and their hands for the rest of the day.

Apart from work in the garden and the fields, there was an oil press, a dairy, a laundry and bakery: there was spinning and weaving cotton and wool, making up garments, blankets and rugs; and a printing press.

By now Ramabai had 10 European helpers but everything continued to be conducted in Indian style: at communion wheat chapatis and non-fermented grape juice were distributed, and staff were chosen with care and given as much scope for initiative as possible.

Ramabai’s daughter Manorama wrote a vivid account of Ramabai’s modus operandi in her final years; moving from department to department, according to where she may be needed most, and followed by a troop of girls carrying ‘Ramabai’s arc’ a tray with compartments for books etc. She might be at the printing press, then out to watch the masons building, or observe the food being distributed.

Ramabai was devoted to animals, having 20 Persian cats; answered their dinner bell, with one usually sitting on her writing desk helping with the translations: she kept a small zoo once a year her creatures and birds were invited to a special tea party; tubs of grain for the buffalos and bullocks, and oil cake for goats, sheep, dogs, cats and squirrels. Her favourites were the bullocks because she said she would never get on without their hard work.

Manorama received a somewhat peripatetic education but was ready to graduate in America when Ramabai called her back to help. She graduated from Bombay, and eventually opened a school in Hyderabad which, however, did not last. Mono died in 1921 followed only a few months later by her mother.

For the last 15 years of her life Ramabai had worked on translating the whole of the bible from Hebrew and Greek into accurate Marathi, which she managed to complete just before her death.

Ramabai was a scholar and ‘Pandita’ before her stay in America, which transformed her into a social worker, educator and public figure both in the U S and especially in India. The Indian government awarded her the Highest Achievement Medal for Social Work, and the institutions that she founded were still going strong as late as the 80’s.

As a Sanskrit scholar trained in the abstractions and ethics of Hindu philosophy, Ramabai was always going to have difficulties with the many ‘impossibilities we are asked to believe before breakfast,’ and it was as well that the Wantage Sisters had been as kind and caring to her and Mono because otherwise it is surely another impossibility that she could have remained a Christian at all. Had she lived in the 4th century or the middle ages she would surely have counted among one of the most celebrated saints of the church, although you would need to toss a coin to determine which side of the various controversies she might have exerted her amazing personality and intellect.

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PHILLIP & JAMES – Saints Philip and James [the less] are apostles, and, whereas next to nothing is known about James from the Bible, Philip appears three times in the Gospel of John, [and not to be confused with Philip the deacon whose exploits come up in Acts:] facilitating, first, the presentation to Jesus of Philip’s brother Andrew; secondly, at the feeding of the five thousand, as a foil, and thirdly, perhaps most significantly, at ch14 v8, when he asks Jesus; ‘Show us the Father and we’ll be satisfied.’

Like ‘doubting ‘ Thomas, Philip’s courage and honesty stand in for the best of us, who are committed and interested enough to ask questions that challenge orthodoxy, and can withstand, as Philip does, Jesus’ implied rebuke: ‘Philip, you’ve been with me all this time and still you don’t know me!’

The first half of John ch14 is often read at funerals; a time when searching questions and doubts arise that Thomas, that most loyal and faithful disciple, begin to raise on our behalf. His courage and trust let Philip, and later Judas [‘not Iscariot’] express their honestly felt anxieties and doubts.

No disciple, student or pupil need ever be ashamed of seeking clarification from a teacher, of however exalted a position; neither need teachers, or parents struggling to assist with homework or attempting home schooling, or – for that matter – teaching in church – ever be ashamed to admit our own inability to understand or explain anything and everything. The Gospels occasionally touch on the reality that Jesus himself sometimes had to learn about the limitations of his auditors and, most of all, his disciples.

Dealing in certainties is always dangerous anyway: Tom Lehrer puts the scientific modus operandi in his inimitable way when reciting the elements to a well-known Gilbert & Sullivan tune:

‘These are all the elements whose news has come to Harvard:

There may be many others but they haven’t been dis’carvard!’

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ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA [296-373] – Athanasius is one of the most important of the Church Fathers, having attended the Council of Nicea [325] as a deacon, championed its decisions as to orthodox belief; become an advocate for monasticism, particularly in the western church, by means of his friendship with Serapion, Pachomius and Anthony the Great, whose biography he probably wrote. He also established connections and friendships with other important figures in the early church such as the Cappadocian Fathers, principally Basil the Great.

The so-called ‘Athanasian Creed’ is generally agreed not to have been his work, having probably been formulated after 451.

BACKGROUND – you can skip this if time presses!

The City of Alexandria in Egypt was founded by Alexander the Great in 331 bce and became the prime centre of learning in the Hellenistic world, accumulating its largest library. Besides its Greek-speaking population it was the centre of the Egyptian mystery religions, and it became a major commercial and cultural centre for Jews, with Philo as its philosophical and theological superstar and with the largest and most richly endowed library in the world. Very early in church history Christians poured into the city.

Whilst this Christian population produced some illustrious leaders and teachers – St Mark as her first bishop, Clement and Origen, to name but a few – there had also been serious quarrels and schisms that extended well past the time of Athanasius, to another bishop, Cyril, who created a further major schism in the eastern church with the so-called Nestorians. A good deal of theological controversy tended to mask increasing rivalry for precedence between Alexandria and Antioch.

Among the early schisms from what we now term orthodox belief in Alexandria, there arose one roughly similar to the Novatianists, who had objected to the re-instatement of those Christians who had lapsed during recent persecutions. Bishop Peter, himself to become a martyr in time, had gladly accepted these back into communion after suitable penance, but Bishop Meletius of Nicopolis objected to this clemency and formed a schism, ordaining his own priests and even bishops. The ‘Meletians’ caused untold trouble, particularly when they allied themselves with the party of the so-called ’Arians’ who became a far greater danger to Athanasius, because their leader, Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia had family ties with the emperor.

ARIUS was a learned, gentle and charismatic theologian and preacher who attracted a following, including 70 women whom he lodged in something like a convent. Like Luther and the Wesleys centuries later, he wrote poems and songs that encapsulated his beliefs and bolstered his support: he was something of an ascetic and a man of good and sincere character, who had originally been given a large church in a quarter in the city of some distinction.

Like many believers before and since, Arius had been puzzled as to how God the Father and the Son could possibly have been of equal standing in the Trinity. The Bible only names the Trinity at the end of St Matthew’s Gospel, written probably 50 years after the resurrection, but it certainly does imply it in other places.

While acknowledging Christ’s divinity, Arius argued that if Christ was the Son the Father must have pre-existed him; that, in his own words ‘There was a time when the Son was not.’ This had been the position held by most theologians before the 4th century. The truth is, that the original writings of many heretics were destroyed, so that we do not know what they actually wrote or believed apart from quotations and opinions attributed to them by their opponents.

Thus it was that after Arius and his writings had been anathematised, opponents whom Athanasius described as Arians, were believed to have denied Christ’s divinity altogether, which, of course, does truly upset the church’s applecart, because if Christ was not divine the whole catholic doctrinal construct falls apart.

The so-called ‘Arian’ party came within an ace of taking over the whole of the Eastern Church, and the Goths and Visigoths in Italy and Spain, who had been originally evangelised by an ‘Arian’ bishop, were still a serious threat as late as mid-7th century. Athanasius’ opponents, however, denied that they were followers of Arius, so what was going on?

In 313 Emperor Constantine issued the edict of Milan which legalised Christianity: later, having conquered all political and military opposition, and established himself as sole ruler of the empire, he felt the need to unite the church under his leadership as well, principally because he thought he owed his victories to God, and still a catechumen until just before his death, he lacked the conceptual equipment necessary to discern theological niceties. The truth is, as Tom Wright put it: ’There was never such a thing as the early church; only early churches.’ The Council of Nicea was really Constantine’s push to bring the temporalities of the church under his rule whilst squabbles over doctrinal abstractions seemed incomprehensibly trivial.

The problem appears to be that Arius and his followers were initially accused of deception, in that they are said to have sworn that they held to the orthodox position when it was clear to contemporaries that they did not, but the real difficulty was that after Arius’ death the ‘Arian Party’ wanted to take control of the entire church, and stopped at absolutely nothing in order to achieve their goal which took an initially theological debate into the realm of politics and morality. It would be naïve, however, to imagine that Athanasius himself was always above using strong-arm tactics. … … …

Athanasius was born in Alexandria to a Christian family and received a classical education and was taken up by Bishop Alexander as deacon, and later as secretary, succeeding him, much against his will, in 328, remaining Bishop with no less than five periods of exile until his death in 373.

Following an initially warm and supportive relationship with the newly converted Emperor Constantine, his chequered career as Bishop of Alexandria lasted 45 years, but with a total of 17 of them in exile:

 **335** THE COUNCIL OF TYRE – With the assistance of the Melasian schismatics, Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia had previously brought a series of trumped-up charges against Athanasius which had failed. Not to be discouraged, Eusebius, with his strong connections with the imperial family, persuaded Constantine that any person against whom so many charges had been brought ought to come to trial before a council to explain himself. Constantine was convinced, and summoned Athanasius to appear at Tyre, threatening to have him arrested otherwise. The council consisted of 60 bishops, most of them Athanasius’ enemies, so both sides knew the outcome.

One anecdote that may be apocryphal is still worth rehearsing: among an entire litany of charges, Athanasius was accused of having murdered Bishop Arsenius, a one-time schismatic who had subsequently repented and gone into the desert. At a previous trial a star witness produced a withered human hand in a box that he claimed was one of the bishop’s which Athanasius had retained for magical purposes. Speaking from the dock, Athanasius asked if anybody knew Arsenius before signing to a priest who led in a shrouded figure who turned out to be the man himself, and, reaching for both hands from beneath the bishop’s gown, Athanasius proclaimed; ‘Here is one hand, and here is the other: I presume that to no man God has given more. Perhaps those who maintain that the severed hand is the hand of Arsenius can show us where it is affixed.’ Quite unphased, however, Athanasius’ persecutors then accused him of raising Arsenius by magic.

None of the charges could stick, and when Athanasius left Tyre he proceeded straight to Constantinople and berated the emperor outside his palace, demanding to be heard before him personally, proclaiming; ‘the Lord judge between me and you if you take the part of my enemies against me.’ ‘What do you want?’ asked the emperor: ‘Let me be tried by a lawful council or let me meet my accusers face to face in your presence.’ Notice the ring of the Old Testament: Constantine made the necessary arrangements.

Never short of ideas, his accusers went on to charge him with intimidating merchants to hold up corn shipments to Constantinople, which was a capital offence, because Constantine was particularly concerned for the population of his own city and had had a close personal friend beheaded for the same offence, but for whatever motives of clemency he had Athanasius banished to Treves in Gaul, without replacing him as patriarch, so that Athanasius, who made friends with the local bishop, continued to effect his rulings by correspondence.

Meanwhile, in 336 when Abbot Anthony heard that Arius was to be re-introduced into communion at Alexandria, he left his cave in the desert and, aged about 83, came down into the city to protest. He attracted huge crowds whom he blessed before returning to his hermitage, but a full-scale riot ensued, with churches and houses burnt down and destroyed. Anthony, who enjoyed enormous universal respect, wrote to the emperor on behalf of Athanasius, but without success.

The church followed this up with a fabulous propaganda coup. At the prospect of Arius being gathered back into the church, old Bishop Alexander, now aged 90, prostrated himself before the altar asking God to take him before he might witness such a disaster, and on the same day Arius, who was being paraded round the city in triumph, suddenly fell ill and rushed into the public latrines and died of an illness with results not dissimilar to those of Judas Iscariot when he hanged himself.

**337** Following the death of Constantine, his son restored Athanasius to Alexandria, where he entered to a tumultuous welcome.

**339** More trouble arose, and Athanasius fled to Rome, appealing to the Pope for support, which was offered freely so that Athanasius, whose difficulties had been hardly known to the western church, garnered many contacts and friends among them.

**346** Athanasius was restored by the western Emperor Constans, against the wishes of his eastern partner Constantius, who was an ‘Arian’ and devised yet another creed intended to form a compromise, which was termed ‘Semi-Arian’ by those who opposed it,

**356** By 349 both the sons of Constantine who had supported Athanasius were dead, so that the remaining brother, Constantius, within whose rule Alexandria fell, was able to replace the governor of Egypt, depose Athanasius again, appoint George, a former pork butcher, as patriarch, and dispatch a general to break up a service in the cathedral. Athanasius took refuge again in the desert around Alexandria until the emperor’s death. Following the death of his friend and mentor St Anthony, Athanasius wrote his biography which was smuggled out of the desert, translated into Latin, and became the model for future such hagiographies.

**361** Julian ‘the Apostate’ acceded to the imperial throne, with his determination to restore Rome’s traditional religion throughout the empire. He re-instated Athanasius in the hope that he and his opponents would fight each other to a stand-still and leave the field open to the restoration of paganism. He lost patience and In 362, having allowed Athanasius to return to the city in February, Julian exiled him later in the year.

**364** Following the death of Julian in 363, Athanasius returned to his See under a more sympathetic emperor, who, however, soon died, and his successor, Emperor Valens, was of the Arian persuasion and almost wiped out the entire Catholic constituency altogether.

**365-6** After a short exile followed by a legal battle, Athanasius took up residence in Alexandria for the last time, dying in office in 373.

Towards the end of his life Athanasius became somewhat more irenic, working co-operatively with people of goodwill whom he called ‘Semi-Arians’ to try to bring them together with those of the orthodox viewpoint who were willing to participate, so that when they were able to accede to a set of doctrines he placed before each caucus, he brought them joyfully back into communion together.

By the time he died Athanasius appeared to have lost his cause and failed, but at the Council of Constantinople in 381, with yet another emperor in position, this time a Catholic, the Nicene Creed was affirmed throughout the whole church, and has remained a workable formula for most mainstream European Christians ever since; but see CYRIL of ALEXANDRIA for the sequel.

Like many luminaries of the church, Athanasius found ways of making the best of his periods in exile, writing, but mainly networking with some of the pioneers of monasticism. He made friends with Abbot Serapion and Pachomius the converted soldier famous for setting up the first proto-monastic foundation; but his most famous and fruitful association was with his friend, mentor and spiritual champion St Anthony Abbot whose biography he wrote.

Athanasius’ other important writing was his short classic ‘On the Incarnation of the Word,’ which far from being an apologetic or polemic against heresies, remains a source of inspiration for Christians in all ages written at a time and place where most of the core doctrines of the Catholic church were still being hammered out, at times, one feels, almost literally! … … …

In effect, Constantine gave the church its freedom to exist under the law whilst actually taking control of its freedom to seek its doctrinal solutions independently. Another dynamic goes right back to the Old Testament, even to the days of Moses of Pharaoh, but later to the time of the prophets, whose function under God was to act as what we might nowadays term a ‘loyal opposition’ providing a check on the power of the kings, which is expressed most simply in the New Testament in the dialogues between Jesus and Pilate. The ramifications of this incredibly complex set of relationships runs right through church history and is still with us today.

During a survey on the state of theology in 2018 78% of American evangelicals, in response to the question; ‘Is God greater than Jesus?’ either answered in the affirmative or were not sure. 20 years ago, when a group of Anglican church wardens were asked something similar 35% responded in the same way without apparently realising that, according to Athanasius, they could be termed Arian heretics!!!