**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

25TH APRIL MARK THE EVANGELIST

26TH APRIL CHRISTINA ROSSETTI [1830-94]

28TH APRIL PETER CHANEL

MARK THE EVANGELIST – There seems to be general agreement among bible scholars that Mark the evangelist is likely to have been the same ’young man’ who fled naked from his pursuers, leaving his cloak in their hands following the arrest of Jesus [Mark ch10 vv51-2].

It is also probable that Mark was the ‘John whose name was Mark’ in Acts Ch12 v12 & 25] and again at Ch15 v35. And in Col Ch4 v10 we learn that John Mark was cousin to Barnabas, which might explain why he championed Mark when Paul wanted to dump him.

Eusebius, the principal historian of the early church, informs us that Mark went to Rome with Peter after the resurrection, and that he would have probably known Paul as well. After Peter and Paul’s martyrdoms he seems to have gone to Alexandria, becoming its first bishop.

Mark’s Gospel is held by the vast majority of scholars to have been the first [there are still some who argue for Matthew’s] and may have been written either in Rome around 65 or in Alexandria in about 70. It takes about an hour and a half to read aloud from beginning to end, and was probably intended to be read in church. It jumps straight in by stating that it is the story of Jesus the messiah, and there are no nativity episodes. What has puzzled scholars rather more than that is the obvious addition of verses at the end that bring the resurrection story up to date, but if it was being read aloud in church the congregation would have known the end of the story.

There is less obvious theological spin in Mark than in the other Gospels, and for that reason, and for its thoroughly business-like adherence to the story, its emblem has become the winged lion from among Ezekiel’s ‘four beasts.’ Moreover there is an authenticity about the Gospel, probably arising from Mark’s time with Peter whose unwillingness to spare his own blushes and those of the other disciples lends it a ring of truth.

Mark it is who has Jesus styled ‘Son of Mary’, at his appearance at the Capernaum Synagogue in ch3, implying that Jesus’ hearers believed him to have been illegitimate. It is Mark who is honest enough to recount Jesus’ tactical error at the end of ch1, where a public healing meant that he could no longer enter any other towns in the locality. He also makes it crystal clear that Jesus’ family had been waiting outside the room in which he was ministering, in order to take him in charge, which was how families dealt with members they believed to be a danger to themselves, or even insane.

For all these reasons, and for the assurance of knowing that he spent time with Peter and Paul, and conceivably even with Luke, those of us interested to place Jesus in his historical context would find Mark’s Gospel the most reliable.

From the little we can glean about his life and spiritual formation, it may have taken Mark ‘s faith to touch base, but that can be said to various degrees for all the disciples, and we should all be encouraged when we ask ourselves how we might have reacted whilst still seeking after truth as Mark was. Clearly he had grown a good deal if he was able to mention his streaking episode after Jesus’ arrest, so never give up hope.

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CHRISTINA ROSETTI [1830-94] – Christina’s main claim to fame is that she wrote ’In the bleak midwinter.’ As a poem, not intending it to be set to music: she also wrote other religious as well as love poetry, rather less subtle that John Donne in both departments, but nevertheless interesting and often mysterious.

Her father, Gabriele Rosetti was a political refugee from Naples, who became Professor of Italian at Kings College; a Dante Scholar. His son Dante Gabriel was one of the Pre-Raphaelite artists who spent a lot of time at the Rosetti home, visited from time to time by most of London’s Italian community. Her brother, Dante Gabriel Rosetti painted her, as did most of the other Pre-Raphaelites, usually as Mary in some guise or other, but not as herself.

Her childhood seems to have been a happy one in a close family with three siblings: her mother, who was half English, educated them. In later life Christina suffered from depression and poor health,’ but as a child she had a foul temper and once broke up all the furniture in a room in a tantrum. It seems her characterisation as ‘delicate’ went back to some kind of physical breakdown in her mid-teens, which has been attributed to Graves’ disease, a condition of the thyroid that can have neurological symptoms: her poetry shows her to have been conflicted and frustrated and a feeling of melancholy never seems far away.

Apart from regular church attendance, she lived her life ‘submerged’ at home, although several suitors did come on the scene, and there was an engagement between 1848-50 with somebody who converted to Rome and lost her until he converted back, and then round again: religion was that important to her. She did have a social life and met many of the other Victorian literary figures.

Her poetry, which seems to have become fashionable to some extent, is reckoned to be technically accomplished, and has its moments.

 Her best known poem after ‘Bleak midwinter’ is entitled ‘Goblin Market’ which deals with temptation, desire and seems to be concerned with the process of addiction, in this case to the extraordinary fruit on sale at the mysterious Goblin market. The goblins surely stand in for Satan, and Laura’s temptation, attraction and addiction to the fruit, which she has only tasted once, clearly represents the distracting and destructive power of sin – of any kind – not necessarily addiction, although in the case of the most serious sin the process is often the same.

Laura’s sister Elizabeth warns her against the temptation and it is she that goes to market and resists the rather violent blandishments of the goblins, and effects Laura’s redemption and recovery by means of licking the juices of the fruits from her sister’s clothes where the goblins had struggled to make her take some. The fact that some commentators have put a lascivious interpretation on the redemption should not distract us from understanding the poem as an insightful and quite courageous foray into the occasional lure of ‘sin’ that attacks everybody at some time: the idea that Laura had descended to such an indignity would become her ‘rock bottom,’ and would cure her of the obsession; an optimistic ending, in that the experience of addicts indicates that, on the whole, a sense of moral degradation tends to exacerbate rather than cure the addiction.

Christina’s faith was real: she wrote several books for SPCK, and like many Victorians, she did not always find it easy. It is important to bear in mind that Dante the poet and theologian was always present in the family, which must have had its effect.

It is difficult to understand quite how Christina Rossetti found her way onto the calendar while many other Victorian women were out in the world accomplishing, or assisting in the accomplishment of miracles of grace and pastoral care, but here she is, a woman who deployed her literary talent in the service of her faith.

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PETER CHANEL – Peter [Pierre] Chanel was born in France and his parents lived on land that had been confiscated from the church after the revolution, and Peter felt a sense of guilt and wished all his life to make amends. He was ordained in 1828, and after three years doing well in a run-down country parish, and a spell teaching at Valley, where he had been trained, in 1833 he was accepted by the Marists, a group of mission priests, and five years later in 1838 he fulfilled his ambition to become a missionary, being sent ‘To preach the Gospel on the islands of the South Pacific,’ which sounds rather vague, as was his preparation for his ministry.

He and two lay brothers arrived on the Island of Futuna in the Fiji group, and were initially well received, bringing medicines and taking care of the poor, but the situation there was a delicate one.

Traders had already arrived in search of a quick profit because of the rare metals to be obtained, and had cheated and stolen, and abused the native women. There were British and French gunboats patrolling, whose purpose was to protect the traders so that there was a good deal of resentment, except that the missionaries were respected for their work and their example.

Not for the first time in history the missionaries found themselves too successful for their own good: Chief Niukiki’s son, together with several of his friends, accepted baptism, and his father was so infuriated that he sent his warriors out to kill all the missionaries, and Peter seems to have been public enemy number 1. At all events he was clubbed to death.

Peter Chanel stated that his death mattered nothing because Christianity was well established and would not die out, and, sure enough, within a year and after the death of the chief, the whole island had converted.

Peter Chanel was canonised in 1854, and is honoured as the protomartyr of the Pacific and Australasia, and of the Marists.