25TH MAY THE VENERABLE BEDE

All we know about Bede is found in a brief autobiographical sketch at the end of his ‘history,’ in which he makes mention of many other ‘books’ he wrote, mostly bible commentaries – during his apparently peaceful life spent in the monasteries of Jarrow and Wearmouth from around 680 until his death, on Ascension Day 735. There is a host of legends as to how he got the epithet ‘Venerable,’ but the simplest is that it may have been a term applied to all priests at the time.

It seems that at age 7 he was given over to the monastery to be brought up; that there was a terrible plague that killed all of the boy oblates except Bede himself; that he received deacon’s orders aged 19 – the canonical age being 25; and that he was priested at 30, both at the instance of his abbot. There is a letter from Alcuin to the abbots of Jarrow and Wearmouth recording what a dedicated and conscientious student Bede had been in his time.

Bede had access at the monasteries to an especially well stocked library, and his writings demonstrate his acquaintance not only with the Church Fathers, but with many other branches of learning. He states that the object of his teaching and writing was ‘to meet the needs of the brethren.’ One of his pupils was Archbishop Egbert, founder of the school at York which was attended and made famous by Alcuin, who, in turn, brought many of Bede’s works to Aachen with him when he joined the Palace School, which assisted in spreading his works and his fame all over both eastern and western Europe.

Over and above all this, Bede took a lively interest in the world outside the monastery walls and seems to have applied himself to the monotonous manual work of writing, without the aid of a copyist; and all in a joyful spirit and one of simple charity to serve, and to live in obedience to the monastic rule.

Alcuin quotes him as saying; ‘I know the angels visit the canonical hours and the congregations of the brethren: what if they do not find me there? May they not say” Where is Bede?’”

What we find with Bede is characterised as ‘the sanity of saintliness;’ a harmony between the active and contemplative life; ‘toil unsevered from tranquillity that many people today find in some of the simple repetitive work involved in gardening and food preparation, for example; but equally the occasional very human need for a break: ‘Having completed the third book of the commentary on Samuel I thought I would take a rest for a while, and after recovering in that way my delight in studying and writing proceed to take in hand the fourth.’

Like all good teachers, however, Bede also seems to have possessed and nurtured in himself a very gentle pastoral feeling towards the weaker brethren. This spirit also manifests itself in the charity in which he writes even of opponents whom he sees as having been mistaken, but nonetheless conscientiously holding their beliefs. It does seem that he loved and reverenced King Oswald and the Celtic party in the disputes with the representatives of Rome, and there are other historical sources that place some of Bede’s omissions into perspective, but he is still the best and most reliable historian of the early English church that we have, and without him whole chunks of historical information would have been inaccessible to us.

These virtues of straightforwardness, kindness and tolerance are qualities that the English have traditionally prided themselves on cultivating, but which many of us may mistakenly eschew as being old-fashioned.

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26TH MAY AUGUSTINE OF CANTERBURY

Christianity had come to England by the Romans, but the network, such as it was, dissipated somewhat with the Roman withdrawal in 410, and the Anglo-Saxons imported their pagan religion whose Gods survive in our days of the week. By the end of the fifth century there remained a residual Christian presence in the areas that they had not yet penetrated; Wales, Somerset, the Cotswolds, Devon & Cornwall and Cumbria: King Ethelbert of Kent had married a French queen who had brought a bishop to court with her.

Augustine of Canterbury was our first Archbishop: `formerly Abbot of the monastery of St Andrew in Rome, he was sent to re-evangelise the English in 596, and returned to Gaul briefly only to be consecrated Bishop in Arles. He died either in 604 or 605.

Bede writes:

‘King Ethelbert granted Augustine and his companions a dwelling in the city of Canterbury, which was the chief city of his kingdom, and in accordance with his promise, he allowed them provisions and did not inhibit their freedom to preach. As soon as they had occupied the house given to them, they began to emulate the life of the apostles and the primitive church. They were constantly at prayer, they fasted and kept vigils; and they preached the word of life to whomsoever they could. They regarded worldly things as of little importance and accepted only the necessities of life from those they taught. They practised what they preached, and were willing to endure any hardship, and even to the point of dying for the truths they proclaimed. Before long a number of people, admiring the simplicity of their holy lives, and the comfort of their heavenly message, believed and were baptised. On the east side of the city stood an old church, built in honour of St Martin, during the Roman occupation of Britain, where the queen, who was a Christian, used to pray. Here the monks first assembled to sing Psalms, pray, to celebrate the Eucharist, and to preach, and to baptise, until the king’s own conversion to the faith gave them even greater freedom to preach, and to build and restore churches everywhere.

At last, the king himself, among others, attracted by the pure lives of these holy men and their joyous promises, the truth of which they confirmed by many miracles, believed and was baptised. Thenceforward great numbers gathered each day to hear the word of God, forsaking their heathen worship and entering the unity of Christ’s holy church. While the king was pleased at their faith and conversion, it was said that he would not compel anyone to accept Christianity; for he had learned from his instructors and guides to salvation that the service of Christ must be accepted freely and not under compulsion.

Meanwhile God’s servant Augustine visited Arles, and, in accordance with the command of the Holy Father Gregory, was consecrated Archbishop of the English Nation by Etherius, Archbishop of that city.’

That is the official version: Bede also had access to the traditions and documents from the establishment Augustine had founded in Kent, including the correspondence between himself and Pope Gregory; the experienced and urbane ruler and administrator, author of ‘Pastoral Care,’ and the Italian monk evidently ‘untimely ripped’ from the Pope’s monastic foundation, unsure of himself, lacking in worldly experience, and anxious to do the right thing. He even turned back and asked Gregory to think again once he made it into Gaul where, according to Rowan, the bishops there had some difficulty in believing that this shy unworldly monk could possibly head up a mission. Pope Gregory told him to keep going!

When he encountered leaders of the older Christian traditions already established in the west of England Augustine stood on his dignity and regarded them as inferiors: his quandary seemed to subsist in how to bring everybody else into line when he spoke no English and lacked the first notion about the culture he had been sprung into. His only support system was the team that had travelled over with him, so we find him asking Gregory about policy and practice:

* How should he relate to bishops in Gaul? ‘Consult them properly and don’t interfere when you’re not asked even when you think they’re getting things wrong.’
* What is he to do about the differences between church customs in Rome and those in France?
* Which are the customs he should introduce in England? ‘Different churches just do things differently: use you common sense.’’
* How do you put together the marriage customs of the church with the rather different ones of the pagan tribes in Britain? ‘Don’t punish anyone for having followed their own customs; just make sure that in future they know what the rules of the church are.’

And so on, with the Pope assuring Augustine:

* Yes you can baptise women when they’re pregnant
* No there is no prohibition against men coming to communion the morning after having had sex with their wives

If we are tempted to think that the mission was all about the enforcement of regulations, we miss the point that it was the example of these monks that brought about conversions: their lifestyle was perceived as being an attractive one because it offered initiation and inclusion into something more than the tribe.

 Rowan makes the point that if we see a preoccupation with sexual mores here it is important to realise that it is these that often define cultural differences, and it was with the intention of creating less discontinuity in the process of converting whole societies that Gregory advised Melitus, who headed up a much-needed back-up mission, in a famous letter, to build churches on existing temple sites or simply to take them over sometimes: negotiating the limits of multi-culturalism is a problem that has never gone away, particularly when the next major crisis in our church history was between Celtic and Roman traditions that were not even properly resolved after the synod of Whitby.

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26TH MAY JOHN CALVIN [1509-64]

Just to be on the safe side, this day is shared between Calvin, Philip Neri, one of shining lights of the Catholic reformation, and our own Augustine of Canterbury: how Anglican!

This article will be limited to a brief survey of Calvin’s life and achievements, which were considerable.

John Calvin was born in 1509: like many contemporaries, he latinised his name to ‘Calvinus.’ His father, the son of a boatman, received a good education and did some business and administrative work for Noyon Cathedral and had strong enough connections to swing his son a couple of benefices and have him tonsured at age 12. At 14 he was sent to study theology on a bursary from his bishop, but after a year moved over to law at the behest of his father, who, following a quarrel with the authorities was excommunicated, and his brother kept up the grudge, which tells you a bit about the family!

In 1528 Calvin attended law schools at Orleans and Bourges, earning a doctorate. He also learned Greek and studied the fashionable humanist writings, some of which, like Erasmus’ ‘In Praise of folly,’ satirised the church, and he familiarised himself with the works of some of the early German reformers.

After his father’s death in 1531 Calvin attended the Sorbonne to study ancient languages, and in 1532 completed his first book, a commentary on Seneca’s ‘Treatise on Clemency,’ which was very well received.

His father’s fight at Noyon must have had an impact on Calvin’s attitude to the church, but his support for some of his friends with moderate reforming views gathered momentum as he witnessed them fleeing for their lives or even being executed. In 1534 he had to flee Paris. At about the same time Calvin underwent an intense conversion experience; he resigned his benefices and ‘came out’ in favour of reform.

In 1533 a campaign of repression began in France against Protestants, and towards the end of 1534 King Francis I who had been a target for extreme reformers, intensified it, martyring thousands. At the same time Calvin completed the first [Latin] version of his ‘Institutes of the Christian Religion,’ with a preface dedicated to Francis, but from the safety of the protestant haven of Basel, whence he had fled and remained working for a year.

Following a brief trip to Italy with relatives he intended to continue his scholarly pursuits at Strasbourg, but was forced to make a detour to Geneva, where news of this up-and-coming Protestant scholar went before him. At the invitation of friends, particularly the uncompromising preacher Guillaume Farel who threatened him with the wrath of God if he failed to help him manage the church there so Calvin obeyed what he felt to be God’s will for him.

The local council at Geneva had expelled their Prince Bishop, and his retinue of Catholic priests fled. Making a somewhat shaky alliance with the rather more conservative council at Berne, the city state of Geneva, already a rich commercial centre and with a thriving print industry, found itself under threat of counter-invasion and reprisals from the Duke of Savoy, its suzerain.

Another threat came from the shock felt everywhere at the Anabaptist John of Leiden’s invitation from the good people of Munster to head them up in what amounted to a theocracy. John was said to have drifted into insanity and in 1535 it was by the agency of a loan citizen who, after 17 months, opened a gate to let the imperial forces restore their rule and take retribution.

With this startling revolution so near in time and place the Geneva City Council needed to demonstrate a distinction both in purpose and effect in order to forestall similar retribution, and needed to find allies and firm leadership rather quickly so in 1537 Calvin was invited by the council to be their minister, and, by a show of hands, they agreed to:

‘Promise before God that we should live in future according to his holy evangelical laws and by the word of God, and that we should abandon all Masses and other ceremonies and papal abuses everything that is added to them.’

In the face of hagiography and ‘godly’ propaganda it is important to realise the primarily political nature of this move, which should not, however, detract from Calvin’s own wholly conscientious intention to create a model polity of Godliness in Geneva, but we are to assume that the show of hands may have indicated a majority decision only, and once the practical application of the council’s high-sounding resolution became apparent, reaction was inevitable.

Calvin took office three months later, and elders and magistrates enforced his moral code, though somewhat more strictly in the city than in the outlying countryside. All bawdy songs and provocative dancing was banned, as was swearing: recusancy carried a fine, and denying God attracted a 3-day prison sentence on bread and water in the first instance, and a whipping for any repetition. All festivals were abolished except Sundays, and even Christmas could only be celebrated on the Sunday after the 25th of December.

Unsurprisingly ordinary people who had been free to enjoy their leisure as they wished, were not best pleased to find themselves compelled to attend sermons and be summarily deprived of what for the most part, had been innocent pleasures: they had simply exchanged one form of tyranny for another, and in April of 1538 they threw Calvin out along with Farel.

Calvin moved to Strasbourg, where he lectured, looked after French refugees and composed his commentary on Romans. Under the benign influence of Martin Bucer, he devised a system of church governance, and married a widow, who died in 1549: Calvin did not marry again, but always remembered his wife as a faithful helper in his ministry.

In 1541 the mood in Geneva had changed and Calvin was invited back and found himself in an almost unique position of strategic and moral advantage: all he needed to do from now on in order to get his own way was to threaten to leave!

We should not, however, think of Calvin’s Geneva as a theocracy and he was no dictator: not only did he have to deal with the council who paid his salary, but he also experienced stiff and well-organised opposition from some former allies within the church, such as Pierre Caroli, who had Calvin and Farel indicted as Arian heretics, a charge they had to answer at a synod in Lausanne. This and other theological controversies rumbled on for years and cost Calvin immense grief.

In 1553, on another occasion when Calvin’s stock was low, Michael Servetus, a rather harmless eccentric who had, however, been condemned to death by the Catholic authorities for denying the Trinity among other things, was unwise enough to visit Geneva, and speak in public, for which he was arrested, tried and burned at the stake though Calvin appealed for a more merciful mode of execution. It was by no means a given that one jurisdiction could summarily execute ‘justice’ on behalf of another, but Calvin had sounded out legal opinion cautiously and had the relevant trial papers from the authorities sent to Geneva. This highly dubious act of sheer expediency gained the Geneva regime enough credibility from both Catholics and fellow reformers alike that the threat of retribution receded.

Geneva became a refuge for an increasing number of French reformers, and Calvin’s systematic teaching and administration made it relatively easy for him to train many of these, with a view to sending them back out into France and, in fact between the 1540’s and ’94 not a single native of Geneva held leading office in their own government. [Calvin died in 1564 but he was ably succeeded by Theodor Beza who carried on his legacy with efficient loyalty.]

The city of Berne had seceded from the alliance and returned to Catholicism, but Calvin’s writ ran in Geneva despite intermittent struggles with the council and determined resistance from a bitter party of opponents, who howled him down and interrupted his sermons with gun shots; set their dogs on him and threatened his life.

We have the wrong impression of Calvin if we think of him as a brave and reckless hero: on the contrary, he describes himself as a timid man who had been frightened by all this dedicated hostility, and he suffered poor health throughout most of his adult life. He died totally worn out in 1564 at the premature age of 54.

Calvin‘s system of church governance consisted of four’ orders: paster, teacher, elder and deacon. Men carrying out these four roles managed the city state.

* Pastors performed the duties of the clergy; administering the sacraments, preaching and offering spiritual counsel to the people.
* Teachers supplied education to children and adults.
* Elders provided oversight to ecclesiastical and consequently to civil discipline and were representatives from the community council.
* Deacons, selected by the congregation, provided for the poor and administered the hospitals.

Calvin saw the roles of the church and state separately, but because the pastors spoke for God government leaned towards the church.

He had set up an academy in Geneva that later became its university.

Amid the sermons, letters and commentaries Calvin wrote, the work for which he is famous is his ‘Institutes of the Christian religion,’ which he first published as an extended catechetical aid in 1535 in Latin. There were subsequent expanded editions in 1539, ’45 and finally in 1559, which is the one that was translated into English in 1561 and has been compared with Aquinas’ ‘Summa Theologica’ which is even longer!

A book review in Diarmaid MacCulloch’s ‘All Things Made New’ deals with some of Calvin’s theology; some of his controversies and his miscalculations and mistakes while making a case for him to be considered as the fifth doctor of the Catholic church: Geoffrey Treasure’s excellent account of ‘The Huguenots,’ places Calvin in the perspective of French history.

Inevitably Calvin’s Geneva was hailed by his disciples and followers as a kind of Godly Utopia, but whereas other reformers achievements were confined very largely to their own regions, ‘Calvinism [he hated the term] was exported into French Huguenot culture; to the Netherlands and thence to South Africa; to Scotland via John Knox; to the Puritans in England and thence to America.

COMMENT

It is much easier to understand and sympathise with Calvin and his theological perspective when you know a little of his life. If you are brave enough to tackle ‘the Institutes’, you would immediately spot connections with it.

There is more scriptural warrant for predestination than most of us would like to think, and it is Augustine, rather than Calvin, whom we have to thank for it originally.

It was Archbishop Tutu who suggested that ‘God has very high standards but very low expectations.’ Perhaps we can hope and trust in God’s mercy a little more than Calvin did?

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26TH MAY ST PHILIP NERI [1515-95]

By complete contrast, Fillipo Neri is the Patron Saint of Rome; of humour and laughter.

Born in Florence in 1515, the son of a notary, he was educated by the Dominicans at St Mark’s, where, only seventeen years earlier the crazy rabble-rousing Friar Savonarola had been hanged at the instigation of the Borgia Pope Alexander VI, and his body publicly burned.

The Dominicans showed Philip his portrait, his bible and his cell, which may well have contributed to his decision not to join any religious order, nor to become a priest, because his own gentle and happy personality was a million miles from that of the misanthropic killjoy whom the Dominicans no doubt regarded as a martyr. Neither would Philip have doings with any organisation related to the church: like the reformers he knew things had to change.

In his mid-teens he was sent to live with an uncle who was a merchant, with the intention that he should join the business. On a visit to nearby monte Casino, however, he learned about the Benedictine way of life, and at age 18 alone in a mountain retreat, he experienced a vision from which he resolved to give himself wholly to God and travelled to Rome.

There Philip began by teaching the two sons of a fellow Florentine, living a simple and holy life, existing on bread, olives and a little wine. From 1535 he studied philosophy and theology at the Sapienza where he encountered Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier, neither of whose aspirations to military-style discipline nor ministry appealed to him. After three years he sold his books and dedicated himself to charity and evangelism, spending his nights in prayer, usually in the catacombs of San Sebastiano along the Apian Way.

It was here in 1544 that Philip experienced the ecstasy that is said to have miraculously enlarged his heart, a legend that we can probably accept figuratively. He still balked at the thought of ordination.

Like many holy people Philip seems to have stumbled on his real vocation almost by accident: he enjoyed wandering the streets of Rome and striking up conversations with workers or anybody else he met: being possessed of a particularly happy temperament, he attracted many people of all ranks and made friends easily.

This gift for friendship together with the evident holiness and joyfulness of his faith, soon attracted a following some of whom accompanied him helping the poor and visiting the city hospitals and churches.

In 1548, Philip established the Confraternity of the most Holy Trinity for poor laymen who would worship and read together, assist pilgrims to Rome and support those in convalescence. In the Jubilee Year of 1575 the fellowship is said to have assisted some 145,000 pilgrims.

In 1551 Philip was finally ordained and found a berth for himself at a college of secular priests in San Girolamo, where food and lodging were provided but no stipend. By 1564, he found himself at the head of a group of sympathetic priests, and as the Confraternity grew a large room was built over the church there to accommodate its work and was named the ‘Oratory’ which is how the fellowship acquired its name of ‘The Oratorians.’ The ‘model’ consisted of a group of secular priests living together without vows, and minimum regulations.

Philip’s ministry now centred largely on confession, which he heard with such gentleness, empathy and often even with humour that people came to him and stayed on for spiritual direction; yet another gift that he discovered he had. In time his reputation brought to him cardinals and even Popes for council and direction.

In 1593 he intervened in a serious dispute between France and the Holy See that could have led to war, when Philip insisted on offering absolution to Henry IV, the Protestant king who had converted to Catholicism expediently in order to be accepted in Paris as king by the Catholic side in the [French] wars of religion.

The gatherings usually consisted of prayer, the reading of a book, either from the bible or one of the mystics, and an important feature was the singing of ‘Laude.’ The ‘Laude’ was a genre of Italian religious songs sung often to well-known secular or sacred tunes, often in praise of Mary or a saint. The group would sometimes visit a church, usually one of the seven great churches in Rome, and listen to music there.

As ever a new group with a large following of layfolk attracted jealousy and suspicion, not to mention that he ran his services in Italian rather than Latin, and at one time Philip was suspended from his priestly duties for two weeks while accusations against him were investigated but another counterreformation saint, Charles Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, spoke up on his behalf.

While Pope Paul IV was at the Vatican novelties were resisted, but at the accession of Gregory XIII a new dispensation brought new hope and in 1575 the ‘Congregation of the Priests of the Oratory’ received papal approval. Gregory found him a church of his own and he gave 800 crowns towards its refurbishment. While more donations flowed in, a cardinal found him a disused convent for the confraternity to live.

While he was still alive Philip was venerated as a saint and was the most popular man in Rome; hence his honorific: ‘Apostle to the Romans.’ He was formally canonised by Pope Paul V in 1622.

By the time of his death in 1595 there were seven oratories around Italy, and the model spread rapidly to south Germany, Spain, Poland and France, where it was modified by Pierre de Berulle, who centralised it and gave it a superior general. It was John Henry [Cardinal] Newman who introduced the oratory first in Birmingham in 1848, and in London in 1849, moving to its Kensington home in 1854.

COMMENT

Philip and St Charles Borromeo lived through the 18 years of the Council of Trent, with its endless debates and ever-hardening spiritual arteries, but the work of the Holy spirit necessary to revive the Catholic church emanated far more palpably through saints such as Philip and Charles; through architecture, sculpture, painting and music in which the Oratorians have a footnote.

The outpouring of polyphonic church music reached its peak in different countries at different times, but roughly during the 16th century: composers like Palestrina and his less famous contemporaries sometimes composed for the Oratory, but the underlying trends in Italian music were moving either towards enlargement of forces [polychoral] as in Rome and particularly in Venice, or towards what we understand best as ‘Italian’ singing; one expressive melodic line accompanied with discrete harmony, and it was this genre which had existed in popular and folk music all over Europe, that the ‘Academy’ in Florence and Mantua adapted to their own artistic purposes and a new generation of composers gradually followed, though not without opposition from conservatives.

From this developed the opera, which tended to centre on classical [pre-Christian] plots, so they were banned during Lent. The Oratorians encouraged the composition of these operas but on religious themes and without staging them, so that what remained was a drama sung but not acted, which was permitted and even encouraged by the church: hence the new genre of the ‘Oratorio’ though this developed after Philip’s time.

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28TH MAY LANFRANC [1005-89]

There is a statue of LANFRANC, William the Conqueror’s first Archbishop of Canterbury on the outside of the cathedral.

He was born in Pavia, northern Italy probably in 1005, and studied Canon and Civil Law in northern Italy and Paris. For a while he lived the life of a travelling scholar customary at the time, and became a Benedictine monk, teaching with some success at the school of Avranches [1039-42,] to students from France, the Low Countries and Germany many of whom distinguished themselves and, like Anselm, became life-long friends.

 In 1042 Duke William [the future Conqueror] made Lanfranc Abbot of Bec, in Normandy, though he very nearly blotted his copybook in 1053 by objecting to William’s marriage to Matilda of Flanders, who was a relative. Eventually, however, we find Lanfranc visiting the Pope in order to gain his approval for the marriage.

Lanfranc made a great success of Bec, which had been rather poor, so in 1063 William moved him to take over his new foundation at Caen as abbot.

In 1070 William brought Lanfranc over as Archbishop of Canterbury well after his predecessor, Stigand, had been canonically deposed in the 1050s. Lanfranc had no wish to come to England but his loyalty to William made his decision for him.

The Archbishop was an ex officio member of the King’s Council, but with support from William he rather effected in the church what William achieved in the country at large, replacing all the Anglo-Saxon bishops and abbots with Normans and even sending a commission round the country to change the dedications of those churches with Anglo-Saxon saints’ names to Roman ones, and in doing so ended the cults of much-loved English holy men and women. Alphege and Dunstan were spared only by the intercession of Anselm and Wulfstan, who managed to hang onto his seat at Worcester.

He held councils in 1072, ’75 and ’76; rearranged some of the diocesan boundaries, e g placing Lichfield in the Diocese of Chester etc: new dioceses were created, and their cathedrals moved from depopulated centres into new centres.

There was a dispute with the Archbishop of York, who maintained that his province was independent of Canterbury’s jurisdiction, but Lanfranc won that one. He also used his legal training to have bishops tried before lay juries. Whilst supporting the Papacy, Lanfranc did what he could to maintain the independence of the English church, as well from papal interference as from corrupt lay influence. He also exerted himself to gain papal approval for William’s invasion of England!!!

As a Benedictine, Lanfranc adopted the Cluniac style monastic ethos, and appointed abbots who would reinvigorate the monasteries that had been reformed by Dunstan, Aethelwold and Oswald a century earlier.

On the political front: in 1075 he managed to uncover a revolt against King William of two earls, one of which he had to excommunicate. On William’s death In 1087 Lanfranc secured the succession for William’s son, and did what he could to maintain good political order, but died in 1089.

David Knowles, the much-respected expert on monastic and spiritual matters, writes of Lanfranc’s wisdom and strength; that his letters show decision and an ordered and disciplined mind, whilst pointing out that; ‘We may perhaps detect in more than one of his actions as Archbishop of Canterbury a prudence of this world that contrasts with the direct candour and simplicity of Anselm, …’ who succeeded him as Archbishop, but in Anselm we encounter a truly great man and a 5-star saint.

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30TH MAY JOAN OF ARC

You can still see the very spot in the marketplace of Rouen where Joan of Arc was burned: there is a monument there on which people still lay flowers. There’s no sign of her there: the authorities didn’t want any remains to be available for veneration, so they threw her ashes in the Seine.

Joan was born in a small village in north-eastern France near Burgundian territory, which was pillaged and burned several times during her childhood: she lived towards the end of the 100-years war between England and France.

The French had lost every battle in a generation, and after the death of Charles VI, his young son, the Dauphin, [equivalent to our Prince of Wales] had run out of luck and of options; and if we wonder how Joan became such a beacon of hope to the army, it’s important to bear in mind that psychology and superstition played as great a part in mediaeval battles as resources and good leadership

Joan’s story is widely known. In brief, she claimed to have had visions telling her to go to the Dauphin, and, defeating the English along the way, to finally make it to Rheims Cathedral and have Charles crowned King, in order to thwart the infant Henry VI’s claim to the throne of France.

 Understandably the French military command sent her away, but after one of her prophecies had been seen to materialise, and having no other alternatives, Joan was conducted to the Dauphin. By means of her encouragement and an almost miraculous lifting of the siege of Orleans and a further succession of three French victories to gain enemy-held towns, the detachment finally made it to Rheims.

What the stories tend to omit is that the authorities did everything they could to minimise Joan’s part in the victories; understandable, and very much of its times, but something posterity has chosen to ignore.

Having been wounded in a skirmish outside the walls of another town, Joan was captured and exchanged by the English for a Burgundian nobleman. It would have looked bad for an English church court to try her, so Joan was given in charge to a Burgundian bishop, and over a series of 15 interrogation sessions before a court of accomplished and educated churchmen, she gave a good account of herself.

Joan’s answers put one in mind of Jesus’ promise to his disciples that under this kind of severe duress, the Holy Spirit would provide them with the right words.

There were two main points: if it could be proved that she was a witch, the French claim to the throne could be invalidated, and if a woman showed signs of eccentricity, she was always likely to be taken for one. The bishop asked Joan the kind of trick question that would condemn her however she answered it: ‘Are you in God’s grace?’ A ‘no’ would be taken as admitting she was a sinner, and ‘yes’ would show her presumption in knowing God’s will. In the event she answered: ‘if I am not in God’s good grace, may he put me there: if I am, may God so keep me there. I should be the saddest creature in the world if I knew that I were not in God’s grace.’ To all intents and purposes Joan had outwitted some of the best theologians and canon lawyers of her time and they were hexed.

The other charge was of wearing men’s clothes, which she did in prison, of course, to make it harder for the guards to rape her. Compelled to revert to women’s clothes in prison, it is impossible to imagine that she would not have been abused, which may have contributed to the serious mental collapse she suffered.

If prison broke the spirit and resolution of John the Baptist, we need not be surprised that Joan eventually broke and signed a confession and received a life sentence. Subsequently she suffered a vision in which she was taunted that she’d sold her immortal soul in order to save her life, and she withdrew her confession and was executed in very short order.

Like all such popular characters, Joan’s story attracts a lot of sentimentality: portraits of her in elaborate dresses completely miss the point that she was the poor uneducated daughter of a peasant. Neither is it helpful 600 years after the event to question her authenticity: Joan’s statement that she would rather have been staying at home with her spinning than obeying her vision is surely authentic; and the experience of having her village trashed around her as a child must have stayed with her one way or another.

Joan was acquitted of everything at a ‘retrial’ 30 years later, and it is rather shameful that it was not until 1920 that she was acknowledged a martyr and canonised.