

THE TWENTY-FIRST JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURE
1985

FOR ALL THE SAINTS

Gerald Priestland

About the Author

Gerald Priestland, writer and broadcaster, was born in England. He was educated at Oxford and then joined BBC News. In 1954 he went to New Delhi as the BBC's correspondent for South Asia. Later he worked in the USA and the Middle East as well as London. He covered the war in Vietnam, the black ghetto riots and the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. In the late 1970s he became Religious Affairs correspondent for the BBC and became well known for a regular series of talks "Yours Faithfully", and for a 13-part guide to the Christian faith called "Priestland's Progress". He retired from the BBC in 1982 "in order to do fewer bigger things better, to slow down, and to see more of my wife". His wife Sylvia is a printmaker and photographer, and they have four children.

Gerald Priestland has published several books, including "The Future of Violence", "Dilemmas of Journalism", and two volumes of "Yours Faithfully". He gave the 1982 Swarthmore Lecture at London Yearly Meeting under the title "Reasonable Uncertainty". He was born an Anglican, confirmed a Presbyterian, and is now a member of the Society of Friends.

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ABOUT THIS LECTURE

Gerald Priestland believes that the saints were - and are - the most vital and common expression of faith available to us all. In their being they show our common humanity at its best, and that being is undogmatic. The Society of Friends, he contends, owes its persistence to its saints, who reflect love, courage and intimacy with God. He outlines the basis and history of the 'saintly system' in the Church, using examples of particular saints. He shows how the existence of saints is evidence of the humanism of Christianity, and how it is their lives rather than their writings which inspire us.

A distinctive quality of saints is that they make others feel like doing good as a natural thing. George Fox, founder of Quakerism, exhibited many of the qualities of a saint - simplicity, openness, courage, peacefulness. Within the Society of Friends today every Meeting that has spiritual life owes it to the presence of two or three everyday saints.

THE JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURES

This is one of a series of lectures instituted by Australia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends on the occasion of the establishment of that Yearly Meeting in January 1964.

This Lecture was delivered in Canberra on 6 January 1985 during the Yearly Meeting.

James Backhouse was an English Friend who visited Australia from 1832 to 1838. He and his companion, George Washington Walker, travelled widely but spent most of their time in Tasmania. It was through this visit that Quaker Meetings were first established in Australia. James Backhouse was a botanist who published full accounts of what he saw, besides encouraging Friends and following up his deep concern for the convicts and Aborigines.

Australian Friends hope that this series of lectures will bring fresh insights into truth, often with reference to the needs and aspirations of Australian Quakerism.

William Oats
Presiding Clerk
Australia Yearly Meeting

"FOR ALL THE SAINTS"

*For all the saints who from their labours rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy name, O Jesu, be for ever blest.*

Alleluia.

Back home in England I have something of a reputation for being an Anglican entryist - meaning someone who has only secured entry to the Society of Friends in order to subvert it with the sinister doctrines of the Church of England. In fact, it is pretty hard these days to say what doctrines the Church of England does believe in; but, quite apart from that, I plead Not Guilty. It's true that I was kidnapped and baptised at an early age - probably a violation of my human rights - but in spite of being subjected to a succession of Anglican boarding schools and (most sinister of all) the University of Oxford (where I was compelled to wear a white frock if I went to chapel) I can say that I am not and never have been a confirmed, let alone ordained, member of the Church of England. It's true that I *was* once confirmed as a member of the Presbyterian Church - because I thought their sermons were so much better than the Anglicans' - but for some reason nobody has ever seen fit to accuse me of Calvinist entryism; which is a pity, because at least it might help to defend me against the charges which are likely to arise from this lecture. Who could possibly accuse a Calvinist of favouring Idolatry? But - yes - I am going to speak out in favour of the saints, and some of you will at once think of candles burning before plaster images, of reliquaries stuffed with dusty bones, and of prayers addressed not to God Himself but to shades of the dead - who may not even have existed. Not merely Anglican entryism, surely, but Catholic entryism of the most superstitious kind, enticing Friends into that most deadly of heresies (from *our* point of view) - Devotion to Doctrine.

Now in fact I get on very well with Catholics. They do at least understand about silence, contemplation and mysticism, and they are the least likely of Christians to be infected with the plague of biblical fundamentalism. I regard myself as an ecumenical Friend. I see our society as a Lay Order within the Greater Church of God, and I take very seriously the injunction of London Yearly Meeting to share in the life and fellowship of the whole Christian community and to show willingness to learn from others. I am not in favour of merging the

Society with any other churches. I have no use for deacons, priests or bishops within the Society. And I would be appalled at the use of sacraments by the Society, or the adoption of Creeds. But I do understand that others need them, and I can see the purpose of doctrine: I myself see it as a useful tool to work with - though never an idol to be worshipped. And it is in this spirit that I approach the subject of saints.

Let me briefly outline my thesis. I agree the saints have been overgrown and exploited with mumbo-jumbo. But I think we do wrong to reject them as the outmoded clutter of mediaeval superstition. I think they were - and still are - the most vital and common expression of Faith available to us all. Oh yes, there are some dubious and unworthy saints in the calendar; for the Church, like the Society of Friends, is a human institution, and the saints are human too. That is their great advantage. Some talk more and some talk less, but it is in their simple *being* that they show forth our common humanity at its best, and that *being* is undogmatic, it is totally ecumenical, and I believe it is thoroughly Quaker. The Society owes its foundation to its saints; it owes its improbable persistence to its saints; and they are still among us today. They are, in fact, just about all we have. For we, eschewing rituals and doctrines, have little else to feed on in our meetings but the love and courage and intimacy with God which rises like an odour from those few among us who have that gift of holiness - though they will never admit it.

What, then, is a saint?

I had better say now that sainthood is above sex, and you'll find far more female saints in history than you will female painters or poets or generals or prime ministers. The Church having been what it has been - sexist, if you will - male saints are in the majority; however, I am well aware that women have always claimed the same rights to holiness as men, and manifested it, too. Though we know little about them, the Three Marys have always headed the list of saints.

Admittedly, Mary the Mother of Christ is a rather special case - it is impossible not to see her as elevated by the Church to something perilously close to a demi-goddess - but what made the apostles as a whole saints was their obvious closeness to the Lord. Some were martyred, some were not - John, for example, is said to have died of old age at Ephesus; how far they were all miracle-workers is debatable; but the fact that they had been chosen personally by Jesus, had received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and must surely be at the Lord's side in Heaven made them without doubt the original saints - though, I must emphasise,

there was no authority or machinery to make them officially so. We can find certain texts in the Gospels or St. Paul hinting that some people would be granted special status in the life to come, but no suggestion, I think, that the Church on earth would have any say in the matter. In any case, the Lord Himself would be returning shortly to make His own choice between the sheep and the goats.

So how did it happen that the saintly system got started at all? It is pretty clear to me that we should not blame the Church for it, or only if by "the Church" we mean the whole body of believers and not some hierarchy. The fact is, the Lord did not return and His followers were sorely persecuted. Miraculously, their faith survived, though many of the faithful perished, and it seemed perfectly reasonable to those who had not known the Lord personally to address their prayers to him "in care of" the martyrs now reaping their reward. The catacombs of Rome are full of graffiti calling on the departed to "Pray for us". Now, to a good Quaker this is shocking: we all agree that we need no intermediary between us and God, and certainly that is what I believe. But for us, the world of the departed spirits is a good deal less familiar than it was for the early Christians; and can any of us say, sincerely, that his or her spiritual conversations with God are as intimate and reassuring as a petition to someone we had actually known or knew about as a human being whose remains were still among us? What else would the saints be doing but interceding for the members of their community on earth?

It follows from Christ's own death and resurrection, through the Christian conviction that death is not the end but a triumphant beginning, that the martyr becomes the saint above all. He or she has conquered, is free, has the very ear of the Lord.

But what about those remains, those relics? Why, if the spirit has escaped, emphasise the very chains it has shaken off? Far from imitating pagan practices, the Christians shocked their neighbours by doing the very opposite. Here is what one pagan historian wrote:

"They collected the bones and skulls of criminals who had been put to death for various crimes, made them out to be gods, and thought that they became better by defiling themselves at their graves. 'Martyrs' the dead men were called, and ministers of a sort, and ambassadors with the gods to carry men's prayers."

Another commentator expressed his horror at the Christians' display of such "ill-omened sights of the dead" and demanded "How, after being present at such ceremonies, could anyone approach the gods and their temples?"

So, you see, the early Christian cult of the martyrs was not some old Mediterranean custom: it was something strange and new. I think it was basically a celebration of the world turned upside down. What to the pagan were criminals were to the Christian heroes. What seemed a shameful defeat was a glorious triumph. What looked like disgusting carrion was priceless treasure. And it's important to notice that where that treasure was, the martyred saint still kept a foot upon earth, perhaps an ear to the ground, for his grave - or later his shrine - was where you went to get in touch with him and pray for his intercession. At first these sites were in the baleful cemeteries, outside the city walls; but later, as Christianity became legitimised, the bones were often dug up and moved into churches and basilicas; or else the very cemeteries were built up into sacred suburbs. The presence of the relics could drastically affect the social standing of the neighbourhood - I dare say they even affected property values.

The removal of holy bones from the graves to the shrine often became the occasion for dividing them up - a skull here, an arm there, a rib sent off to a daughter-church which was unlucky enough to have no martyr of its own. Late pagans like Julian the Apostate were disgusted at it: "You have filled the whole world with tombs and sepulchres", he cried. But it seems to me that Christians delighted in shocking the old order. In a rather gruesome way, they gloried in the Incarnation - they showed forth that holiness inhabited mortal flesh and was not confined to Olympus and the Imperial palaces.

Now, I have been talking about the first two or three centuries of the Christian Faith, when martyrs were a living and dying reality. They were recognised as such by the people: the Church was not well enough organised as a hierarchy to assert much control. We do find that great teacher Origen laying the theological foundations for the cult of the martyrs around 235 A.D., but he is not trying to define exactly who they are.

When the Church came above ground with the approval of the secular state, there were good reasons for its taking the saints in hand at last. One was, quite simply, to stop the devaluation of sainthood - they were multiplying ridiculously, with some quite imaginary saints building up large followings. Furthermore, the Church and its local bishops were extremely anxious to appropriate to themselves

the influence and the income that holy relics could bring, notably through pilgrimages.

But with Christianity now the official religion of the Roman Empire, there were fewer opportunities for martyrdom; and it began to be argued that holy living might be as valuable to Christ as holy dying, especially when one had lived a life of austerity and sacrifice. Virgins and Confessors (that is to say those who had suffered for their faith without actually being martyred) became venerated; and so did the great teachers like St Augustine. Before long, their names were being woven into the fabric of the Mass, and their pictures were being used to beautify the churches. Ordinary people felt themselves no more worthy to address God directly than they were to approach their king or emperor other than through his ministers; and they liked the idea of a local saint, who would understand their accent and their circumstances, or of a saint who specialised in their complaint or occupation. It is fashionable to say nowadays "Your God is too small", but to many simple people the mysterious notion of the Trinity was just too big.

Of course there was concern among theologians about overstepping the line to idolatry, and one gallant soul called Vigilantius seems to have taken a particularly firm stand against it: but he was unpopular for it and most of his work has been swept away. Scriptural or unscriptural, Church and people wanted their saints, and it was ingeniously argued that there was a clear distinction between the *worship* that was due only to God and the respect and imitation of the saints. They were not "little gods", they were merely invisible servants of God who would deliver our prayers to Him or, like attorneys at court, argue our case for us.

I think I had better pause here to answer the silent protest that must be welling up in some Quaker hearts: But what has this to do with us? We have shaken such mummery from our shoulders long ago - surely only a few believe it now?

Actually, not so few; but it is hardly for me to expound the doctrines of Rome. I have taken you along this road for two reasons. First, to show how the idea of the saint has developed (and we still have some way to go towards that). Second, which is perhaps my basic argument and one which ought not to be abhorrent to Friends, I think the saint -throughout the ages - illustrates the basic *humanism* of the Christian religion. It is not, fundamentally, an intellectual system, a compendium of abstract theories, and it has not survived - it has certainly not *developed* - because those theories can be argued true by logic. Christian doctrine does help us to organise our ideas, to package them and pass

them on to others who can then examine and criticise them in an orderly way. But ideas don't express themselves, just as music does not play itself. Music has to be played on instruments and ideas have to be expressed by people.

Christianity (as distinct from Christian doctrine) is a way which is followed by people. It works because people respond to it, and we can only define it in terms of what those people do. Looking back, we can also see Christianity as a story - the story of people following that way - and there is no story without characters, reacting in human ways to events and to each other. To me, stories are far more powerful vehicles for religious truth than doctrines, and in his typically Jewish way, Jesus thought so too. Like any rabbi today, if you asked Him a theological question, he answered with a parable; indeed, His whole ministry was a parable, and so are the lives of the saints. They reveal the truths of God not in theories, but in visible human terms. And that, I think, is what the early and mediaeval Christians were looking for in their rather theatrical saints and martyrs. To use a Quaker catchphrase, they "spoke to their condition".

This idea of "condition" is essential to the Quaker view of faith. It recognises that each of us has an individual personality, partly inherited and partly forged by our circumstances and experience: we cannot all be expected to respond in the same way to the same proposition. That is what's wrong with attempts to enforce religious conformity, or indeed conformity to any system of beliefs, for one is bound to be left mouthing allegiance to things which are personally meaningless - wearing clothes that simply do not fit. But how different is our loyalty to people! We can admire them for what they are rather than what they say. We can love them, warts and all. And while we should be at least conventionally polite to everyone we meet, we can make special friends of those whose conditions speak to our own conditions. So it is with the saints.

I shall be turning later to the living saints in our midst including the false saints. You may well ask why we should pay any attention to those who have been dead and gone for centuries, unless we really do believe (as I don't) that they have that magical power to intercede for us with God. Some of my friends in the Eastern Orthodox churches, knowing that I have this reservation, have tried to explain to me their use of the saints in prayer. The Orthodox, as you may know, are much devoted to ikons - stylised portraits of the saints which have always to be painted in the traditional way and painted devotionally, in a spirit of prayer. These, say my friends, are by no means to be worshipped in themselves, but to be used as a focus *through* which the prayer is projected onwards to God. The prayer must not stop short at the ikon. For the saint himself was never to be worshipped

when on earth. He was a living icon of the Lord, a window through which we could get an insight into the mind and ways of God. Now, whether *we* would consider him worthy to be so regarded is another matter, and perhaps an irrelevant one because we no longer have any way of checking up on him. But tradition has made him (or her) so, as far as the faithful are concerned. You may like to compare a favourite paradox of mine on the Divinity of Christ: If Jesus was not God, He is now.

And it is this load of traditional faith which explains why we should pay attention to the saints of long ago. We, after all, are Quakers today because of the faithfulness of our saints. I do not really know if George Fox deserves the respect we accord him - in many ways he emerges from his own Journal as an arrogant and vindictive man - but he is George Fox, and many people far closer to him than we are adored him. And so I stand in awe of him and of his Valiant Sixty and the many other Quaker saints who came after them: for they embody the faith and courage which kept alive that vision of Truth which we still claim. For all that the vision is valueless unless we have seen it for ourselves (and not borrowed it second-hand) it gives us great strength to know that others have seen it before us and triumphed in it - that we are part of a continuity and not just a passing fad. I do not know how much inspiration you manage to draw from early Quaker writings. I find dazzling flashes here and there, but for the most part they are thickets of obscurity and at times alarmingly evangelical. But when you read what their authors did and the sort of people they were, then truly you feel yourself uplifted and inspired. And so it is with the saints.

Or, to be frank, with the best of them. For there have been some very odd saints indeed, especially Celtic ones. The Irish Church, which survived while England was deep in paganism, was originally much closer to Constantinople than to Rome, and some of the saints it exported to Britain were bizarre characters indeed. My own favourite corner of England happens to be Cornwall, and the Cornish map is peppered with extraordinary saints who are to be found nowhere else and who, at best, must have been missionary monks or nuns from Ireland, Wales and Brittany. I have taken a special fancy to St. Sennara, the patron saint of the parish of Zennor, about whom (according to the reference books) nothing whatever is known. But I think I know. I think she is really Azenor, a princess of Brittany, who sacrificed one of her breasts to save her father from a snake (it is a complicated story) and was rewarded by Heaven with a breast of gold. Her jealous step-mother had her nailed up in a barrel and thrown into the sea, where she gave birth to St. Budoc the Drowned, was miraculously fed by angels, and ultimately washed up on the coast of Ireland where she became washerwoman to

a nunnery. How she got to Cornwall is a matter of conjecture (I think she stopped there on the way back to Brittany, which would have been natural enough), but Budoc was real enough, so why wouldn't he have encouraged the recognition of his mother?

Then there is St. Leven, who was a noted fisherman, and used to go out on the rocks every evening to catch himself his supper. One day he felt a good tug on his line and pulled it up to find *two* sea-bream caught on the one hook. One would have been enough, but anxious to be fair to each, the good saint threw them both back. It happened again, and again St. Leven returned the two to the sea. When it happened the third time, he recognised the hand of Providence and took them both home with him only to find that his sister, St. Breage, had come to visit him, bringing with her her two hungry children. The story, however, has a barb in it, like the hook. For we are told the children gobbled their fish and choked to death on the bones. What the theological significance of this is, I do not know - it suggests to me that first instincts are best - but then, Cornish saints, are never noted for their theology.

So you must regard my last two saints as a little light relief. I am afraid they would never have passed the rigorous tests for sanctity applied by the Church of Rome; but then, the Celtic Church was a great deal less formal and made its saints by popular recognition. It was perfectly capable of producing truly impressive figures: Patrick, Columba, Oswald, Aidan and Cuthbert were tremendous saints by any standard, but I am grateful to the Celts for reminding us that saints do not always have to be solemn and serene - that they can have a holy craziness about them, like one last Cornish saint I must mention - St. Sithney. One day, God revealed to him that he was to have the enviable position of Patron Saint of Girls. This so alarmed Sithney, who could imagine being plagued for all eternity by young women praying for rich husbands or fine dresses, that he vowed he would sooner look after mad dogs than women any day. And so the Good Lord arranged it: Sithney is now the patron saint of mad dogs (and unofficially of sexists).

Following the age of martyrs many of the saints were missionaries like the Celts, and this is a thread running through the history of the breed: one of the most important functions of the saints is to travel, preaching the gospel and showing Christ not by administering the sacraments but by imitating Christ in their lives. The saint is far more an example than a theologian. And there comes a time when the territory is converted and the missionary settles down to pastoral work. We can be pretty sure, with many of my rare Cornish saints, that the parish church bearing their name is on the site, or not far from it, where the holy person

settled. Most precious of all, though exceedingly rare in England (following the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Puritan Revolution), was to have the saint's tomb at the heart of the church, implying that even in death the saint remained the protector of the people. And where a *whole* saint was not available, a bit or a chip of a saint might do. Failing that - just his or her name could be invoked as patron, though that must have seemed third best.

It must not be thought that the veneration of relics is a uniquely Christian superstition. Buddhism, which in some aspects is an atheistic religion, is exceedingly devoted to them. If you have been to Sri Lanka, you may have seen the uncomfortably large tooth of the Buddha in the temple of Kandy; and under each of those domed Buddhist mounds known as *stupas* or *pagodas* there is said to be some holy relic. The special property of most relics is to promote healing, which we are liable to dismiss as unscientific magic. But perhaps we should not be too hasty about this. I am, personally, sceptical about faith-healing and alternative medicine, but I know many Friends are not; and it cannot be maintained that the healing touch of the holy man, or even his remains, is unscriptural. Quite apart from Our Lord, we have the examples of the mantle of Elijah and of the bones of Elisha (which raised a man from the dead). And the Book of Acts tells us that people were healed by handkerchiefs pressed to the body of St. Paul. As I have indicated, it would be a mistake to attribute the Christian fascination with relics solely to the influx of pagans into the early Church. But of course it had a lot to do with the search for healing, and our own neglect of it owes a great deal to the availability of other treatments. It seems to me that we should not despise the simple believers of earlier times for looking to their saints for help.

I am not going to defend the early mediaeval traffic in relics, though. It may have begun from popular enthusiasm, but it certainly developed into a money-making racket. Chopping up bodies was actually forbidden under Roman Law, and spread into the Western Church from the East. As you may know, the 8th and 9th centuries saw the outbreak in the East of the Monophysite and Manichaeian heresies and of the Iconoclastic Movement (not to mention Islam). All of these tended to dismiss the importance of matter and the flesh, including relics and icons. When Orthodoxy triumphed against them, the Second Council of Nicaea re-emphasised the icons and relics, insisted that churches should display them, and excommunicated those who denied them. For some reason icons never caught on in the West as they did in the East. Western Europe went for relics, and the Crusades provided a ready supply of largely bogus examples, including enough splinters of the True Cross to reconstruct Noah's Ark, the Chair of St.

James, the Chains of St. Paul, the Column at which Christ was flogged - and several heads of John the Baptist.

The collection amassed at Reading Abbey, in England, by the late 12th century had almost 250 items, among them: Our Lord's sandal and his swaddling-clothes, some bread from the Feeding of the Five Thousand *and* from the Last Supper, the rods of both Moses and Aaron, St. Veronica's Veil, and Our Lady's hair, bed and girdle - well, bits of them, anyway. And somebody claimed to have the breath of the Holy Spirit in a bottle.

The buying and selling of relics was ultimately made illegal under Canon Law; but long before that people - including kings and bishops - had resorted to grabbing what they fancied by force. King Canute was a notorious body-snatcher, and personally assisted in raiding St. Paul's cathedral for the body of St. Alphege and in digging up St. Mildred for his collection at Canterbury.

One of the saddest cases of dismemberment befell that lovely person, St. Teresa of Avila, the 16th century Spanish nun. Nine months after her death, a church official had her dug up and, after admiring the firmness of her uncorrupt breasts, cut off her left hand, keeping the little finger as his personal charm. Three years later, appetite whetted, he dug up the saint again, left the convent with one arm as a consolation prize, and removed the rest to Avila itself. Four more times it was exhumed and mutilated. The right foot, the left eye, part of the jaw, the heart, ribs and sundry gobbets of flesh were dispersed as far afield as Rome, Brussels and Mexico. When the Spanish dictator, General Franco, died he had at his bedside (as he had for forty years) a jewelled reliquary containing St. Teresa's left hand . . .

Alas, even today people will not let the saints rest in peace. Quite recently in England, the remains of the Saxon king, Edward the Martyr, have become literally "bones of contention" before the courts with (of all inappropriate denominations) the Russian Orthodox Church seeking to acquire them from private ownership. I should have thought the bones of a king of England ought to be in the care of the nation; but if that's out of order on the grounds that the national church is now protestant and Edward was a Catholic, then at least he should go to the Church of Rome.

I could go on with such horror stories for hours: it is the kind of thing which has always made the English people healthily sceptical about the

Established Church. You may remember Chaucer's remarks about the Pardoner's collection of relics. "And in a glas hee had de pigges' bones. . ." observes the poet.

As I say, saints at their best are local boys and girls made good, and the national Orthodox churches kept it that way. But Western Catholicism, with its heritage of Roman centralised law and a strong papacy, felt obliged - at last - to introduce a formal procedure for canonisation, which could only be sealed by the Pope himself. It did not reach that stage before the end of the 12th century, though, and by that time it was too late to eject the many outrageous, fictitious or unworthy saints who had established themselves in the calendar. It was not until the Second Vatican Council that a tidying up was dared, and doubtful - if attractive - characters like Catherine of the Catherine-wheel were deprived of their solemn feasts.

Today the procedure for canonisation - or the cadet stage of Beatification - is fairly rigorous. The candidate's local sponsors must be able to show that a popular demand exists and must have the support of the diocesan bishop. Rome will then investigate the candidate's life and miracles, which are formally challenged by a so-called Devil's Advocate. Miracles are becoming harder and harder to prove these days, and only two are normally required; but the point is to demonstrate that the saint is already recognised as such by Heaven, since he or she has the power of intercession before the throne. The process tends to be long and arduous nobody should think that the Catholic Church is in the business of mass-producing saints. Not every candidate, by any means, gets through. For example, King Henry VI of England ran into severe political objections, though politics cuts both ways: nowadays you seem to have a better chance of success if you come from one of the under-represented Third World countries.

Once you are canonised, the privileges include the right to be invoked in public prayer, the right to have masses and churches dedicated to you, the right to a festival day, to be painted with a halo round your head, and to have your relics displayed in a tasteful reliquary.

Up to this point my discourse has been dominated by the practices of Rome and Constantinople, for, after all, they have dominated three-quarters of the history of Christianity. The excesses of these practices were part of the origins of Protestantism (in which Friends share), and most Friends would probably still say AMEN to number 22 of the Thirty Nine Articles, denouncing "the Romish Doctrine concerning Images. . . Reliques, and also invocation of Saints. . . a fond thing vainly invented and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture but rather

repugnant to the Word of God." Even so, the Anglican churches have - in their usual ambiguous way - kept the saints in their prayer-books and have toyed, from time to time, with the idea of making saints of their own. The Church of England, in its new Alternative Service Book, has a list of "Lesser Festivals and Commemorations" which includes such figures as George Herbert (the poet), Thomas Cranmer, John and Charles Wesley, William Wilberforce, John Bunyan, Richard Hooker, John Wycliffe, and Josephine Butler (the rescuer of fallen women). And at one time, our own George Fox was a candidate for that list - a just-failed honorary Anglican saint. Goodness knows, in these days of muck-raking investigative journalism, how anyone can be established as having led a saintly life. George, as I say, had an unholy streak of vindictiveness in him. But when it comes to miracles he had something like 150 healings to his credit, including two or three claimed cases of raising from the dead. I must confess that I have not heard of any *posthumous* miracles attributed to him, and I should be very surprised if any Quaker had ever asked him to intercede for one.

But before I move on to the modern saint (of whom I insist George Fox really is an example) I feel I must note two or three symptoms of sainthood which are not generally recognised but which are, nevertheless, quite frequent and for the most part rather appealing. I say "for the most part" because the first I have to record is not for the squeamish and is anyway disputed: I mean the incorruption of the flesh after death. The Western church always took this as a sure sign of sanctity: again and again we hear of saints being dug up - like St Teresa - and found to be not only wholesome and pliable but *fragrant* (violets are commonly mentioned). St. Cuthbert, who died in 687 and was carted around Scotland and England for the next three hundred years before coming to rest at Durham, was found to be still presentable in 1104; and St. Margaret of Cortona is still said to be incorrupt 700 years after her death. On the other hand, nobody bothers to dig up a control group of notorious sinners to see how they have fared; and the *Eastern* churches take the perverse view that a refusal of the body to rot is a sure sign of heresy.

Nevertheless, it does seem to be a characteristic of saints to smell sweet. One keeps reading of an odour of flowers or incense accompanying them. And almost without exception, animals feel at home with them: Francis of Assisi is the extreme example, and there was St. Kevin in whose hands a blackbird hatched her egg and, of course, Sithney of the Mad Dogs - but I find it really is a characteristic of people whom I identify as saints that the animal kingdom relaxes in their presence.

A very few saints have had the power of levitation or instant travel through space: Teresa of Avila was certainly one of them - the evidence is really very good, and all the more convincing because it terrified her and she fought against it, sometimes hanging on fast to the furniture to stop herself rising in the air. But one cannot help feeling it is a rather pointless accomplishment (like so many demonstrations of the occult). I would prefer to emphasise one very common quality of saints, both past and present: that *it is easier to be good when they are around*. It is not that they intimidate us or make us feel guilty about our defects - quite the contrary. It is that their openness and simplicity (another important quality) puts us at ease and calls out the natural goodness in all of us. Unexpectedly, saints are relaxing. They pose no threat to us, they demand no formalities or feigning, they make goodness seem natural.

I suppose the Reformation really marks the borderline between the old-fashioned saint and the modern; not only because we now have a large body of Christians who deny the effectiveness of the saint at all - particularly when he is dead - but because, under attack, the Roman Church begins to create saints on the grounds of their devotion to doctrine: the saints of the Counter-Reformation whose value to the Church is less as incarnate poems of the Christ-like life than as faithful warriors of the papacy. They are, in fact, less justified by their works than by their faith. We should all know that one is no use without the other; but it is my contention that the essential quality of the saint is not what he or she believes and teaches, but what he or she is and does - what they show forth by example.

And on the Protestant side we find much the same error: the development of the lay saint who is not so much holy as *saved*, and he is saved by faith or, worse still, by Predestination. To do them justice, the Presbyterians did not claim to be *certain* about who was elect to salvation and who was damned - though they did exclude people from the Lord's Table if they were obviously loose-living or heretical - but the so-called Independents demanded visible signs of regeneration and proof of sanctity. To a greater or lesser extent this was bound to involve works, but those works were expected to arise from a great conversion of faith: they were the only reliable signs of that conversion. Increasingly, the evangelical conversion experience became the hall-mark of the saint - the saint with a small "s". And the road to such a conversion was less likely to be through mystical or sacramental experience than through listening to sermons which expounded the true Protestant doctrine.

Now I would maintain that another essential characteristic of the true saint - the old fashioned and usually Catholic saint, if you will - is that he or she is a

servant. That is the essential message of St. Francis - service, service, service to God through others. But the Puritan saint, obsessed with the importance of correct faith, turned selfishly inward. To the extent that he cared about his outward deeds it was because he was anxious they should demonstrate that he was inwardly sound and saved. He must not gamble, drink, swear or break the Sabbath, and must never be found questioning the truth of Scripture. All of which might make him *look* virtuous, but was of little service to others. Not surprisingly, congregations of saints like these were easily terrorised by threats of hell fire, and saw every setback in life as a punishment for sin. It was precisely this "roaring up for sin" that nauseated George Fox.

With his Puritan background he, too, had been appalled by his potential for sin and had striven desperately to find some preacher who would free him from it. But when he did achieve liberation - in a most extreme form - it was only by a total rejection of man-made tests and doctrines. He felt himself to be saved - justified - not by faith in the sense of a doctrinal system, but by *trust*, by complete confidence that he had made direct contact with God Himself and needed no intermediary, either human or printed. (Incidentally, I think it was the popular impact of the printed word - including the Bible - which had helped to make England so obsessed with doctrine). Fox then began to make claims such as no Catholic saint had ever dared to make: that he was "come up into the paradise of God and was in that state wherein Adam was before he fell", that he was "a man without sin", and even that he was the Son of God and had seen God's face. "Christ", he would say, "hath taken away my sins."

This idea that Man might actually achieve perfection through Christ had been heard before, from that delightful sect known as The Family of Love as well as from the Ranters, Antinomians and Grindletonians. Later, John Wesley was to toy with it. Quite apart from the Doctrine of Original Sin, I think it is just plain contrary to human experience. However, I am rather glad that Fox overdid things so, for I reckon it makes it impossible for us to worship him or treat him as anything other than a fallible human being of his time. I am quite sure, myself, that he was in fact a recovered depressive - for that kind of extravagant euphoria is typical of someone who has suddenly escaped from the depths of self-hatred and now feels himself bathed in God's forgiveness.

Fox retained many of the characteristics of a Puritan, but he never judged people by the oaths they swore, the creeds they recited or the rituals they observed - only by their lovingness, their openness, their peacefulness, their "walking in the

light". All of which are qualities of true saintliness - qualities of service to others and not self-satisfied badges of moral rectitude.

Fox was undoubtedly a flawed saint - probably many of the canonised saints were too, only the flaws have been painted over by their devotees. Fox had many of the qualities of a saint: the simplicity, the service (both as a healer and as a tireless defender of the persecuted and imprisoned); but above all *he was a man in whose presence it was easier to be good*. In his *Journal* he presents a hard image of himself; but from the fact that so many people loved him and were prepared to die for him I deduce that he gives us a less than complete portrait. What animals thought of him, I do not know.

I have argued that the true saint affects the world through his or her life and personality rather than through words, and I am sure that is true of George Fox. Not that he wasn't a wordy man: he poured out a torrent of pamphlets and epistles, and heavy going most of them are. I think that many Friends, if they really understood what the founder of our society taught and believed, would be taken aback by much of it. But it is not really that which we owe to Fox. What we owe to him is a few basic insights into humanity's relations with God: the essentials, the silence, the simplicity, the openness and peacefulness and courage and - not least - Fox's genius as an organiser. It is flexible and capable of growth (as it must be, if it is to survive) but it hangs together as a tradition; and a tradition is literally "something that is handed over" by one generation of human beings to another. What is essential in this is the human beings - the communion of saints - and the Quaker tradition owes everything to these saints modest saints, flawed saints, spelt with a smaller "s" than ever, perhaps, but still partaking of the essentials of holiness.

You will remember that the great thing about the very earliest of the martyr-saints was that they were believed to have direct access to the Lord. And that, surely, was the heart of Fox's message: that we can *all* have such access, that we can all be saints in the measure of the light given us, and some may be granted more and some less. After Fox came a torrent of Quaker saints: weird ones like Naylor, great ones like Penn and Woolman, little ones like the Valiant Sixty who were to carry the Quaker message from Boston to Constantinople, as well as up and down the British Isles. Again, what mattered was less what they had to say than *how they were*: the way they confronted the powerful, acted out their convictions and endured their persecutions. It is not their theology that speaks to us today so much as their stories. And story - human character reacting with the world - can still embody truth even when polished into myth.

And so it has gone on with Friends, even through the so-called Quietist years of the eighteenth century, when Quaker business-folk might tend to fall asleep in Meeting for Worship but showed forth the gospel of honesty and humanity the rest of the week. So it was again in the nineteenth century, when English Friends talked very like other evangelicals in the Meeting House, but pioneered every kind of humanitarian reform in the world from the suppression of slavery to the welfare of prisoners and the insane. And now, today, when many Friends sound as if they might be equally at home with Unitarians, Universalists or Buddhists, it is their story as peace-makers and bringers of relief to the suffering that intrigues the world. Australia's own James Backhouse and George Washington Walker were classic examples of all this. We know that they were evangelical Friends and preached in that tradition wherever they went. But as one observer remarked "instead of preaching too much, they kept accounts and kept them carefully. With a view to practical results they were careful to note facts with draper-like precision".

"I was in prison and ye visited me" says the Lord to those whom he rewards with a place in Heaven, and that is precisely what Backhouse and Walker did, as their religious duty. What is more, they did it so conscientiously that Authority was compelled to accept their reports and (ultimately) act upon them. From my point of view, they emerge as the best sort of journalists. But the interesting thing is that they managed to dig up the truth without making themselves unacceptable to Authority, and whenever one reads about them in official correspondence they are always referred to in terms of the highest esteem. One governor's lady - Lady Denison of Tasmania - describes Walker as "The very personification of a mild, benevolent, and excellent Quaker. . . men of all denominations unite in speaking well of him . . . he is never mentioned but with respect . . . and whatever good is to be done, he is sure to have a hand in it." Could there be a better description of a Quaker saint (one who, incidentally, started a bank which I understand is still in business)?

Saints, then, are the very best way of showing what a faith can do; and at a time when people are rightly suspicious of doctrines and ideologies it is tempting to say "We need more faith - let us exhibit more saints". The equipment is at our disposal, all the apparatus of public relations, press conferences, photo-calls and TV and Radio interviews. Other churches are well aware of this, whether they like it or not, and I suppose the world has seldom been so aware who its contemporary saints are: Mother Teresa of Calcutta, obviously, and she even lends herself to the role if it will help to raise money for her causes. There are airborne saints like

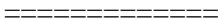
Pope John-Paul II and Dr. Billy Graham, and martyr-saints like Archbishop Luwum of Uganda, Archbishop Romero, Dr. Martin Luther King. Desmond Tutu of South Africa is a worthy candidate, in my view, and at the other end of the scale are such unworthy, self-promoted candidates as Mr Syn Myung Moon and Mr L. Ron Hubbard. We see, here, the dangers of modern, instant saint-making, and Friends can thank themselves for two things: that we could have no possible procedure for canonising anybody and that - despite all that I have said - Quakers just do not have the *magic* to make convincing saints. Backhouse and Walker, for example, were very ordinary people and one simply cannot imagine them with haloes round their heads. Friends, I am sure, do not want to think of any other Friend - alive or dead - as enjoying some special status with God and certainly not of being able to serve as some kind of intermediary between God and Man.

Nevertheless, any Meeting I know that has spiritual life owes it to the presence in its midst of two or three everyday saints. Everyone knows who they are (except, I suspect, themselves) and they are by no means necessarily elders. Nor do they necessarily speak very much. When they are absent, something intangible is lost from the Meeting, and when they are present (even though silent) the Meeting is capable of its best again. It has something to do with the telepathic quality of a truly gathered Meeting and that has something to do with the fact that usually we are "a society of friends" who know and love one another and are sensitive to one another's presence. In the presence of our friendly everyday saint with his (or, far more often, her) glow of being "in the Light", *we find it easier to be good*, and to uncover the Light in ourselves. Such holiness - a modest holiness - is undogmatic and for that reason truly ecumenical, for it is rooted in the common humanity of us all.

And when all is said and done, it is humanity that convinces people. When I examine my conscience as to why I trust in God, I find that fundamentally it is because I trust others - my personal saints - who themselves trust in God and whose lives show me their trust is reliable. Some of them are Friends; some are Anglicans, some Catholics, one Orthodox, some Jews; and several have been dead a long time. Just a few - like Francis of Assisi, as you may have guessed - are official big "S" saints, through whom I can see the Light shining as through a stained glass window. In some ways, saints are better dead, for they are less likely to do things that will disillusion you.

But, on the other hand, there is nothing that you can do for a saint who is dead. One advantage of your modest local saint is that you can not only respond to her love and openness but return it. And this is my last word to you: I know

you must have such Friends in your Meetings or the Meetings would not be there. I urge you, then, to recognise, respect and cherish your saints and they - not I - will then show you the Light.



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