



High Days and Holy Days for October 2020

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Editor: the items with an asterisk appear on this page listing for the first time...

- 1 Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury - the Poor Man's Earl
- 1 Remigius
- 1 Theresa of Lisieux
- 2 Your Guardian Angel
- 3 Hewald the Black and Hewald the White
- 4 St Francis - and the Life of Simplicity
- 4 St Francis of Assisi
- 6 William Tyndale, Bible translator and Reformation martyr
- 8 Demetrius of Sirmium
- 9 Luis Bertran (1526-81)
- 9 Denys of Paris
- 10 Francis Borgia
- 10 Thomas Traherne, poet and lover of nature
- NEW* 12 Edith Cavell, nurse**
- 13 Edward the Confessor
- 14 Donation
- 18 Thank you, Dr Luke!
- 18 St Luke the Evangelist
- 22 Donatus
- 24 Felix of Thibiuca
- 26 Alfred the Great, King of the West Saxons, scholar, 899
- 27 Odran of Iona
- 28 Simon and Jude
- 30 Alphonsus Rodriguez
- 31 All Hallows' Eve

Editor: This month's 'saint' left such a legacy for our lives today that we think it is well worth the page and a half it will take up in most magazines. There is an illustration to go with the article.

1st October: Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury - the Poor Man's Earl

Think of Piccadilly Circus, and that small statue of the angel poised with bow and arrow. Most people think it stands for Eros. It does not. It stands for Anteros, his brother, the god of selfless love. It is a memorial to the greatest Christian Victorian philanthropist, politician and social reformer of his generation – Lord Shaftesbury.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury (1801 – 1885) was a devout Christian who spent his life fighting to help ease the plight of lunatics, chimney sweeps, children in factories, women and children in the mines, opium addicts, and children without any education.

His own early life was loveless and bleak – his parents formal and frightening, his early schooldays a “horror” of “cruelty and starvation”. The only love came from the family’s housekeeper, Maria Millis. A biographer wrote: ‘She provided for Ashley a model of Christian love that would form the basis for much of his later social activism and philanthropic work.’ The reality and homely practicality of her Christian love were a beacon for the young Ashley. She told him Bible stories, she taught him a prayer.

After Christ Church Oxford, where he proved an outstanding scholar, Ashley turned to politics. In 1826, aged 25, he was elected as Tory MP for Woodstock. He was eager to serve on parliamentary committees that got things done; his great life’s work had begun.

Lunatics: In 1827 lunatics were kept chained naked in straw, forced to sleep in their excrement. They were washed in freezing cold water, with one towel for 160 people and no soap. There was gross over-crowding and inedible food: asylums were places to die in.

Shaftesbury’s maiden speech in Parliament was in support of a Bill to improve their conditions. He wrote: ‘By God’s blessing, my first effort has been for the advance of human happiness.’

It took years: from 1827 to 1884 he fought for a succession of Lunacy Acts, writing later of ‘the years of toil and care that, under God, I have bestowed on this melancholy and awful question.’

Child Labour and Factory Reform. Again, reform took years, with Shaftesbury fighting for the Ten Hours Act from 1833, 1842, 1844, 1846 and 1847 – when it finally got through Parliament. No child under the age of nine should work in the cotton or woollen industries, and no one under 18 must work more than ten hours a day.

Miners. In 1842 he fought to outlaw the employment of women and children in coal mines.

Climbing boys. Thousands of young boys were dying in terrible pain – scorched, blinded and suffocated by soot, or with cancer of the scrotum. Ashley fought for Bills in 1840, 1851, 1853, 1855, and 1864 until finally the Chimney Sweepers Act 1875 closed the practise down.

Education reform: 1844 Ashley became president of the Ragged School Union that promoted education for poor children. He wrote that if it were to fail, ‘I should die of a broken heart’.

Religion. Lord Shaftesbury was a devout Christian who became a leading figure in 19th century evangelical Anglicanism. He was President of British and Foreign Bible Society for nearly 30 years. He was very sympathetic to the Jews, and advocated their return to the Holy Land.

Lord Shaftesbury’s funeral service at Westminster Abbey on the morning of 8th October 1885 drew thousands of people. The streets along the route were thronged with the poor: costermongers, flower-girls, boot-blacks, crossing sweepers, factory hands and many more. They waited for hours just to see his coffin go by. He was dearly loved by them as the ‘Poor Man’s Earl’.

One biographer wrote: ‘No man has in fact ever done more to lessen the extent of human misery, or to add to the sum total of human happiness.’

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon called him ‘the best man of the age’. He ‘lived for the oppressed’, he was a ‘moral anchor in a drifting generation’, ‘friend of every living thing’, ‘he had a ‘fervent love to God, and hearty love to man.’

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1st October: Theresa of Lisieux - making the most of life

Theresa of Lisieux (1873-97) should be the patron saint of teenage girls and young women who want to make the most of their lives, despite being constrained by family and school or work.

Theresa grew up in a strict, devout Roman Catholic middle-class family in France, one of four sisters. Her father was a watchmaker. Like her sisters, she entered a Carmelite convent at 15, and stayed there. She was never able to go anywhere, do anything extraordinary, or hold any responsibility. She died at the age of 24 of tuberculosis. Yet this quiet young Carmelite nun became so nationally popular that she was declared patroness of France 50 years after her death. Not bad for someone who didn't get out much!

So how did Theresa do it? By not intending to do it at all. Theresa never set out to become famous: instead, she quietly determined in her spirit to seek God, and, having found Him, to honour Him in her life, to live as closely as she could to the teaching in the gospels.

The result was a life so spiritually radiant that her convent asked her to write a short spiritual autobiography of her pilgrimage. Theresa obliged with 'L'Histoire d'une Ame', which soon became so popular that it was translated into most European languages and several Asiatic ones. Theresa also prayed for people who were ill, and there are many reports of miraculous healings that took place in answer.

After Theresa died in 1897, her book just went on selling. People found the artless sweet simplicity of her observations on her pilgrimage as a Christian compelling. Theresa reminded people of what Christianity was really all about: simple but utter devotion to Christ, not endless outward observance of religion. Theresa helped many in the Roman Catholic Church in France to remember the first principles of their faith.

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1st October: Remigius - praying for ill children

If you've ever prayed for the ill children of non-Christian friends, then you are following in the steps of Remigius (d.533).

Remigius was bishop of Reims late in the 5th century, and the king's son was ill. The queen, Clotild, was a Christian, but the king of the Franks, Clovis I, was not. Then Remigius prayed for their ailing son, and he was healed. The king was so overwhelmed with gratitude that he decided to acknowledge and honour the Christian God.

In his enthusiasm King Clovis seems to have turned his royal household into something akin to the aftermath of a Billy Graham rally/Alpha course, for he commanded that all 3,000 members of the royal household and followers become Christians at once, and that they all be baptised.

Under the protection of King Clovis, Remigius carried on preaching the Gospel throughout the Frankish kingdom. He did some extensive church-planting - founding bishoprics and churches - and was greatly loved by the people up to his death in Reims in 533.

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2nd October: Guardian Angels - keeping an eye on us

The teaching of Jesus encourages us to believe in guardian angels. He once said, 'See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.' (Matthew 18:10)

The existence of angels was suggested in various Old Testament texts, Jesus mentioned them explicitly, and the early Christians accepted their existence and work (Acts 12:15).

In England, devotion to the angels, both in Anglo-Saxon times and later, was strong. In modern times, the great American evangelist Billy Graham has written an entire book on the existence and work of angels.

Alcuin described them as intercessors (in the 11th century Leofric Missal); Herbert of Losinga, bishop of Norwich (d 1119) specially praised them, and his contemporary, Reginald of Canterbury, wrote prayers in their honour.

Honorius Augustodunensis (d 1151) clarified the existing belief of the time by asserting that each human soul, when infused into the body, is entrusted to the particular care of a single angel, who protects both body and soul and offers prayers to God.

For many centuries Christendom was satisfied with the feast of St Michael (and all Angels), but the special feast of the Guardian Angels was introduced in Austria, Spain and Portugal in the 15th – 16th centuries. Guardian Angels were then seen as guardians of particular towns or regions, or of each individual. Pope Clement X made the feast day universal in 1607, fixing its date to 2nd October.

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3rd October: Hewalds the Black and White – martyred because they were different

With Islamic State's current savage persecution of Iraqi Christians in mind, here are two saints for this autumn: Hewald the Black and Hewald the White (d.c. 695). These 7th century Anglo-Saxon priests were living peacefully in Frisia among the Old Saxons, worshipping the Christian God by daily Mass on a portable altar, and reverently devoting themselves to the Divine Office.

Over time, the Old Saxons came to resent these two priests who did not serve their gods. Then the Old Saxons began to fear that Hewald the Black and Hewald the White might even manage to convert some of their people to Christianity. That was unthinkable, and so they took brutal action: they killed them both and threw their bodies into the Rhine. Both bodies were recovered and then later enshrined in the church of St Cunibert in Cologne, where they still remain. It seems that wherever Christianity shines out, there is always the danger of attack from those who give allegiance to a different god.

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4th October: St Francis and the Life of Simplicity

Just about the only thing most people know about Francis of Assisi is that he talked to the birds. Church-goers also know the popular hymn based on his famous prayer, 'Make me a channel of your Peace', which was sung at the funeral of Princess Diana.

However, Italy's patron saint, whose feast day is this month (the 4th) was a more complex, and some would say controversial character. His life spanned the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th centuries. He was born into a very wealthy family, but after what he called his 'conversion' standing before a crucifix. He renounced all his possessions. In fact, he stripped himself of his of his wealthy garments in a public square in his hometown, Assisi. For the rest of his life he and his followers, including his feminine counterpart, St Claire longed, prayed and worked for a life of simplicity – a lifestyle without luxury or privileges. For the Franciscan brothers and the Poor Claires. This meant no private possessions at all. Francis saw that many poor people without these things, actually seemed to live happier and more fulfilling lives than the ambitious rich. He spoke of a simple life not shaped by

money or power but by love and mutual concern. As his hymn says, 'it is in giving of ourselves that we receive'.

Of course, poverty; in our modern western world is seldom a matter of blissful simplicity, as present-day Franciscans recognise. For too many it is a matter of poor diet, over-crowded rooms, rough sleeping and unemployment. The call of today's followers of Francis and Claire is that those who are better-off should 'live more simply, so that others can simply live'. Christians follow a Master who said that He came with 'good news for the poor'. They believe that many of us today can be that good news.

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4th October: St Francis of Assisi - love for the Creation

St Francis (1181 - 1226) is surely one of the most attractive and best-loved of all the saints. But he began by being anything but a saint. Born the son of a wealthy cloth-merchant of Assisi, Francis' youth was spent in fast-living, parties and on fast horses as a leader of the young society of the town. Then he went to the war between Assisi and Perugia, and was taken prisoner for a year.

By the time of his release, Francis had changed. Perhaps his own suffering had awakened him to that of others. In any case, he abandoned warfare and carousing, and began to help the poor and the lepers of his area. Then one day a voice which seemed to come from the crucifix in the small, semi-derelect church of Damiano Assisi 'Go and repair my house, which you see is falling down'.

This religious experience was a vital turning point in Francis' life: Jesus Christ became very real and immediate to him. His first action was to begin repairing the church, having sold some of his father's cloth to pay for materials. His father was not amused, in fact he was furious - until Francis renounced his inheritance and even his clothes by his dramatic stripping off in the public square of the town. The Bishop of Assisi provided him with simple garments, and Francis began his new life.

His inspiration was always religious, not social, and the object of his quest was always the Crucified Christ, not Lady Poverty for her own sake. Francis rebuilt San Samiano, and then travelled as a pilgrim. His compassion for the poor and lepers became famous. Soon disciples joined him, and they set up a communal life in simple wattle and daub huts. They went on occasional preaching tours. (Not until later did they become an Order whose theologians won fame in the Universities.)

In 1219 Francis visited the Holy Land, and his illusions about the Crusaders were shattered. He went on to seek out the Sultan and tried to convert him. Back home, he found his Order was now 5,000 strong, and growing. Francis stepped down as head but continued to preach and was immensely popular. He died after a prolonged illness at the age of 45 and was canonised in 1228.

Francis' close rapport with the animal creation was well known. The story of his preaching to the birds has always been a favourite scene from his life. He also tamed the wolf of Gubbio. This affinity emphasises his consideration for, and sense of identity with, all elements of the physical universe, as seen in his Canticle of the Sun. This makes him an apt patron of nature conservation.

The 20th century witnessed a widespread revival of interest in Francis. Sadly, some films and books caricatured him as only a sentimental nature-lover or a hippie drop out from society. This ignores the real sternness of his character, and his all-pervasive love of God and identification with Christ's sufferings, which alone make sense of his life.

Two ancient, and many modern English churches are dedicated to him.

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6th October: William Tyndale - Bible translator and Reformation martyr

Tyndale was an outstanding English scholar, translator and martyr of the Reformation.

William Tyndale (c. 1494 - 6th October 1536) was born near Gloucester and studied at Oxford and Cambridge. He could speak seven languages and was proficient in ancient Hebrew and Greek. As a priest, his abilities would have taken him a long way, but by 1523 Tyndale's only desire was to translate the Bible, so that English men and women could read it for themselves. It became his life's passion.

For Tyndale had rediscovered a vital doctrine that the Church had been ignoring: that of justification by faith. He had found it when reading Erasmus's Greek edition of the New Testament. In fact, his life's work was well summed up in some words of his mentor, Erasmus: "Christ desires His mysteries to be published abroad as widely as possible. I would that [the Gospels and the epistles of Paul] were translated into all languages, of all Christian people, and that they might be read and known."

Tyndale's translation was the first Bible to be published in English, the first to draw directly from Hebrew and Greek texts, and the first English translation to take advantage of the printing press.

It was to cost him his life. For Tyndale's work was seen as a direct challenge to the power of both the Roman Catholic Church and the laws of England in maintaining the Church's position.

When the authorities had tried to stop his translation, Tyndale fled to Hamburg, Wittenberg, Cologne, and finally to the Lutheran city of Worms. It was there, in 1525, his New Testament emerged. It was quickly smuggled into England, and King Henry VIII, Cardinal Wolsey, and others, were furious.

Tyndale moved on to Antwerp, where for nine more years he continued his work. Then in May 1535 he was betrayed, arrested, and jailed in a castle near Brussels. Tied to the stake for strangulation and burning, his dying prayer was that the King of England's eyes would be opened. Sure enough, two years later King Henry authorised the Great Bible for the Church of England, which relied largely on Tyndale's work.

Not only that, but in 1611, the 54 scholars who produced the King James Bible drew very heavily from Tyndale. Even today we honour him: in 2002, Tyndale was placed at number 26 in the BBC's poll of 100 Greatest Britons.

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8th October: Demetrius of Sirmium - taking a stand, and suffering for it

Demetrius of Sirmium should be the patron saint of anyone who takes a stand for the right, despite knowing they will suffer for it.

Demetrius was a soldier from Serbia in the fourth century. He fought for the Roman Emperor, and that took courage. Then Demetrius converted to Christianity – and took his stand with the Christians. That took far more courage – for Demetrius was then tortured and martyred under the emperor Maximian.

His bravery was not forgotten, and in the years to come he became immensely popular in the Church, where he was called 'The Great Martyr'. Christians thought of his example of faith and devotion to Jesus when they themselves were in trouble, and when they were facing attack from evil spirits and evil people.

Leontius, prefect of Illyricum, built two churches in honour of Demetrius in the early 5th century, one at Sirmium and one at Thessalonica. During the Crusades, Demetrius was 'adopted' by the western

soldiers. Over 200 churches in the Balkans are dedicated to him, and he is today the patron saint of Belgrade. Demetrius' fearless stand against evil makes him a good saint to be remembered in October, with Halloween coming.

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9th October: Luis Bertran – patron saint of Columbia

Do you want your life to make a difference - for the good – in this world? Then Luis Bertran (1526-81) is the saint for you. This fearless Dominican priest so inspired tens of thousands of people in Latin America that he was chosen as patron of Columbia.

Luis Bertran was born at Valencia in 1526. He joined the Dominican Order in 1544, and was priested in 1547. Bertran started with the most important thing any Christian can do: he became a man of profound prayer. The rest of his ministry was built on this deep personal walk with God.

Luis Bertran was appointed 'novice-master', and right away put his faith into action: he began to reform the priests of his own order. Like a John the Baptist, Bertran preached both the fear and the love of God – urging people towards a proper repentance and a turning to God in faith and humility.

But Spain was just the beginning for Bertran. In 1562 he was sent on the hazardous journey across the Atlantic to life in a priory in Cartengna, Latin America. Here he spent six years preaching to the Indians in Spanish, by way of a translator. His holiness and love were infectious - tens of thousands of Indians responded to him, and were baptised. He met the same response when he moved on to the Leeward Islands, the Virgin Islands and the Windward Islands.

Perhaps the Indians loved Bertran so much because he did not just preach to them. He was one of the first to openly criticise the cruelty and rapacity of many of the Spanish 'adventurers', whom the Indians both feared and hated.

Back in Spain in 1568, and now 42, Bertran decided it was time for him to concentrate on training other preachers for the missions. Bertran stressed to them the importance of both prayer and of doing good works that matched their own preaching. For this he won wide respect from all around him. By the time he was 54, Bertran was worn out. In 1580 he preached his last sermon in Valencia Cathedral, and then was taken ill, dying a few months later.

Bertran's example of a life of prayer, humility, integrity, reformation, witness and concern for social justice is very much needed today.

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9th October: Denys of Paris – why losing your head is not always a bad thing

Have you ever held your head in your hands and felt that events were against you? Then Denys is the saint for you. This Christian martyr knew all about holding his head in his hands when times got rough.

According to Gregory of Tours, Denys was an Italian bishop who became the first bishop of Paris. Along with five other bishops, he had been sent by the Pope to convert all of Gaul. Denys reached Paris, where the common people welcomed him, and his preaching was met with great popular success. In time he even went on to establish a Christian centre on an island in the Seine. That was the beginning of Christianity in Paris.

However, Gaul was still under Roman rule, and trouble began for Denys when in the year 250 the Emperor Decius issued an unusual Roman imperial edict. All the citizens of the empire were required to sacrifice to the Emperor in order to prove their loyalty to the old ways. Once they had sacrificed, they could obtain a libellous (certificate) to prove they had complied. This sacrifice was of course out of the question for any Christian, and Denys and several leading Christians in Paris refused. Soon Denys, along with a priest called Rusticus and a deacon called Eleutherius, were imprisoned and beheaded.

So loved had Denys been by the people that stories soon sprang up about how he had then picked up his head and carried it for ten kilometres, preaching a sermon as he walked. Today you can see a statue commemorating this unusual (!) event in the crypt of the Roman Catholic Basilica of Denys in Paris.

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10th October: Francis Borgia – ‘the Jesuits’ second founder’

Here is a saint for you if you have lost the person you love. Here is a saint for you if you would not let your wealth and security stop you from doing something daringly good with your life.

Francis Borgia (1510 – 72) certainly began with it ‘all’. He was the son of a duke, the great-grandson of Pope Alexander VI, and also of King Ferdinand V of Aragon. He was a fast-tracker in his career: by 18 he was recognised at the Emperor’s court, and by 19 he was Viceroy of all Catalonia. Soon he was made Duke of Gandia, and then discovered that his magistrates were corrupt. The first big crisis of his life had arrived.

Francis suppressed the corruption – and paid the price. He was scorned at court. So, he retired to his estate, and instead of planning revenge, planned for more good: he began a Dominican foundation and restored a hospital for his grateful people.

Then in 1546 the second crisis of his life hit him: his wife died, leaving him and their eight children stricken with grief. Instead of remarrying, or turning to warfare, Francis resigned his dukedom in favour of his son, and secretly joined the Society of Jesus.

Francis tried hard to conceal his rank, but his ability could not be hidden. After his ordination, his experience in governing all of Catalonia was put to good use – he was made Commissary for Spain and Portugal, where he founded many colleges and other houses. By 1561 he was called to Rome, and in 1565 he was elected General of the Jesuits.

For the remaining seven years of his life, Francis stirred up a whirlwind: reforming the lives of Christians throughout Europe by inspiring and supporting his clergy. He was so zealous that he has been called the Jesuits’ second founder. He helped found what would become the Gregorian University in Rome, established a new province in Poland, began missionary work in the Americas, and organised relief for the plague-stricken of Rome. When he finally collapsed, worn out with hard work, he prayed for each of his children and grandchildren in turn, blessing them with a thankful heart before he died.

Francis Borgia was born to worldly greatness, but he achieved personal greatness by his indifference to wealth and power: about all he loved God, and wanted to serve Jesus Christ in whatever way presented itself.

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10th October: Thomas Traherne - lover of nature

Thomas Traherne (1636 - 1674) is a good saint for anyone who loves our planet, and who wants to preserve Creation. This 17th century poet and clergyman wrote extensively about his love for nature, seeing in it a reflection of the glory of God.

Traherne was not of a literary family, for his father was either a shoemaker or innkeeper in Hereford. But Traherne did well at the Hereford Cathedral School and went on to Brasenose College Oxford. From there he became rector of Credenhill near Hereford in 1657, and ten years later was appointed to be the private chaplain to Sir Orlando Bridgeman, the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal to King Charles II, who lived at Teddington.

Throughout his years at Credenhill and then Teddington, Traherne led a simple and devout life, and his friendliness drew people to him. He was described as “one of the most pious ingenious men that ever I was acquainted with”, and being of “cheerful and sprightly Temper”, ready to do “all good Offices to his Friends, and Charitable to the Poor almost beyond his ability”. Aside from his beloved books, he seems to have possessed very little.

Instead, he poured his energy into his writings, which had an intense, mystical, metaphysical spirituality. His poems and prose frequently mention the glory of Creation, and his intimate relationship with God, for whom he had an ardent, childlike love. Traherne has been compared to later poets such as William Blake, Walt Whitman and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and his love for nature has been seen as very similar to the Romantic movement, though he lived two centuries earlier.

He is best known for his *Centuries of Meditations*, which has been described as “one of the finest prose-poems in our language.” Lost for many years, and then finally first published in 1908, it was a favourite of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, the Christian humanist Dorothy Sayers, and the writer C.S. Lewis, among others. C.S. Lewis considered *Centuries of Meditations* “almost the most beautiful book in English.”

Traherne died in 1674, and is buried in St Mary's Teddington, under the church's reading desk. Today he is counted as one of the leading 17th-century devotional poets.

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***NEW 12th October: Edith Cavell, nurse**

Edith Cavell is a good saint for NHS workers this year: she cared for the sick despite the danger to her own safety.

Edith was a vicar's daughter from Swardeston in Norfolk, where she was born in 1865. She became a governess, but her heart was for nursing, so she went on to train at the London Hospital, before nursing in various hospitals such as St Pancras and Manchester.

When Edith was 42, she decided to go abroad, and was appointed matron of a large training centre for nurses in Brussels. She was still there seven years later, when the First World War broke out and German troops invaded Belgium on their way to Paris and the Channel Ports.

Edith's nursing school became a Red Cross hospital, and she turned down the opportunity to return to the safety of England. Instead, her nurses tended wounded soldiers from both German and Allied armies.

Sadly, in 1915, when the Germans began their occupation of Brussels, they took a dim view of Edith's work. But they would have been even more unhappy had they known she was helping to smuggle 200 British soldiers across the border into the Netherlands!

Finally, the Germans arrested Edith in August 1915, and put her into solitary confinement. They tricked her into confessing to a charge which carried the death penalty. But Edith refused to show either regret at what she had done, or any fear or bitterness towards her captors.

On 11th October 1915, the night before her execution, Edith was visited by the Anglican chaplain to Brussels, the Revd Stirling Gahan. Together they said the words of *Abide with Me*, and Edith received her last Holy Communion.

She told Gahan: "I am thankful to have had these ten weeks of quiet to get ready. Now I have had them and have been kindly treated here. I expected my sentence and I believe it was just. Standing, as I do, in view of God and eternity, I realise that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness to anyone."

Edith was shot by a firing squad next day, on 12th October 1915.

After the war her body was exhumed and buried in Norwich Cathedral. Her memorial service in Westminster Abbey attracted thousands. A commemorative statue of her stands near Trafalgar Square.

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13th October: Edward the Confessor – helping to found Westminster Abbey

If you approve of giving money to help cathedrals survive, then Edward the Confessor (1003 – 66) is the saint for you. This early King of England was the virtual founder of Westminster Abbey. And never mind entrance charges - at one point in his life, Edward was giving a full tenth of his income to Westminster Abbey.

Edward was the son of King Ethelred the Unready and his second, Norman wife, Emma. After various ups and downs which included a brief exile in Normandy, Edward was made King of England in 1042.

As King, Edward had a tricky time of it – trying to keep the peace for over 20 years while various Danish and Norman magnates struggled for power (which eventually led to the Norman Conquest). Scholars have argued over how much of a success he was as a king.

As a Christian, there is no doubt: Edward's holiness was evident to all. He made himself accessible to his people, he was generous to the poor, and chaste. He was also reputed to have seen visions and even achieved miraculous cures for people through prayer.

Edward did much to help the Church in many ways. His lasting contribution was the original Westminster Abbey - a huge Romanesque church, 300 feet long, with a nave of 12 bays. Westminster Abbey became the place of coronation and burial of kings and queens of England. It was finished and consecrated just before his death. Edward was buried there, and his relics are undisturbed to this day.

During the Middle Ages, Edward was a very popular saint: along with Edmund of East Anglia he was widely considered to be England's patron saint for a time.

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14th October: Donation - North Africa Christian martyr

Some Christians today have the curious idea that being a Christian guarantees a prosperous life in this world. St Paul was more realistic – throughout his epistles he urges Christians to pray for patience and

endurance in this world. Donation (martyred c 484) is a timely reminder that we are called to be witnesses, and that that may not be easy.

When Hunneric, the King of the Vandals, closed all the churches in North Africa in the late fifth century, Donation and his friends were tortured, driven into the desert, and left to die of exposure. Many Christians in Muslim Africa today face similar dangers for Christ. Pray for them, that they find the courage and endurance they need.

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18th October: Thank you, Dr Luke!

By David Winter

'Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, bless the bed that I lie on' - my grandma taught me that one. At least it meant I never forgot the names of the writers of the four Gospels. This month Luke, the writer of the third of them, has his feast day - 18th October.

He was, we learn from the letters of St Paul, a 'physician' - an educated man and probably the only one of the writers of the New Testament who was not a Jew. In modern terms, he was Turkish. Paul took him as one of his missionary team on a long journey around the Middle East, and they clearly became close friends. Under house arrest later in his life Paul could write, 'only Luke is with me'.

However, it is his Gospel which has established him as a major figure in the history of the Christian Church. Mark's Gospel may have more drama, Matthew's more prophetic background and John's a more profound sense of the mystery of the divine, but Luke offers us a Jesus who is utterly and believably real. This man turned no one away, reserved his harshest words for hypocrites and religious grandees, cared for the marginalised, the poor, the persecuted, the handicapped and the sinful. His Gospel is full of people we can recognise - indeed, in whom we can often recognise ourselves.

He was also a masterly storyteller. Try, for instance, the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Read it (this time) not as a sacred text but as a brilliant piece of story-telling: subtle repetitions ('your son, this brother of yours'), believable characters, drama and profound emotion. There is the older brother, so cynical about his sibling's alleged reformation, the 'prodigal' himself, so hesitant about throwing himself on his father's mercy after the folly of his earlier behaviour, and there is the father, of course, abandoning the dignity of his role in the family and actually running to welcome his wretched son's return.

There are more women in Luke's Gospel than in any of the others, but also more poor people, more lepers, more 'sinners' and tax-collectors, more 'outsiders' who are shown to be 'inside' the love of Christ. This, for many of us, is the great Gospel of inclusion and compassion. Here is a Jesus for the whole world and for every one of us. Thank you, Dr Luke!

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18th October: St Luke the Evangelist - linking the sacred and the profane

To St Luke, a Gentile, we owe the beautifully written Gospel of Luke, and the Book of Acts. He was a Greek physician, a disciple of St Paul, a companion on some of his missionary journeys, and an inspired writer.

Luke's gospel focuses on the compassion of Christ. His gospel contains some of the most moving parables, such as the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son. This, with his emphasis on poverty, prayer and purity of heart, make up much of his appeal to the Gentles, for whom he wrote.

Women figure more prominently in Luke's gospel than any other: look out for the extended story of the Virgin Birth, and stories of Mary, Elizabeth, and the woman who was a sinner.

In Acts, Luke is remarkably good at linking sacred and profane history, as subsequent archaeology has shown. A principal theme of his Acts is how the early Christians moved away from Jerusalem into the pagan world, and especially on to Rome.

Luke is the patron saint of doctors, surgeons and artists (due to his picturesque style of writing). His symbol is an ox, sometimes explained by reference to the sacrifice in the Temple at the beginning of his Gospel. In England 28 ancient churches were dedicated to him.

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22nd October: Donatus - and the danger of exploring an unfamiliar church

When you are out and about on the road far from home, ever feel tempted to pop in and explore an unfamiliar church? If so, think of Donatus as your patron saint – and beware. You don't know what you may be letting yourself in for....

In 829 Donatus, an Irish monk, had completed a prayerful pilgrimage to Rome, and thought his adventures were over. Now there only remained the long road home to Ireland. He had got as far as the beautiful little town of Fiesole, which sits high above Florence in Tuscany, when he saw a lot of people milling about the cathedral. Curious, he decided to look in.... as he entered the cathedral, the bells rang, the lamps were lit and wham! Without any diocesan paperwork at all, he was acclaimed to be the new bishop the people had been praying for.

Donatus was very surprised, but he accepted that this turn of events must be God's will for his life. So he became bishop, in a time when bishops did even more dangerous things than they do nowadays. Instead of verbal forays into the national press, Donatus was given the job of leading Pope Louis the Pious' troops against the Saracens. Safely back in Fiesole, Donatus settled down as a scholar and teacher of his new flock. But he never forgot his native Ireland, and so did the 9th century equivalent of 'twinning' his diocese, for he opened a little hospice where any Irish pilgrims passing through Tuscany could stay in safety. He died in 876, and 12 centuries later, his relics lie in the present cathedral of Fiesole.

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24th October: Felix of Thibiuca - the man who would not give up his Bible

Do you value your Bible? If so, Felix of Thibiuca (247 – 303) is a good patron saint for you. The year was 303, and Diocletian was emperor in Rome. In February of that year he decided that Christians were NOT a good thing. So, he issued an edict: all copies of the Christian Scriptures and all liturgical books were to be surrendered and burnt. Diocletian had decided to 'wind up' this upstart religion.

The persecution began in Rome. By June of that year, the edict had reached North Africa, and Thibiuca, where Felix was bishop. Felix was arrested and interrogated. Yes, he said, he did have a copy of the Scriptures. No, he said, he would not hand them over.

Felix was a highly respected bishop, and even the authorities were loath to take immediate action against him. So they gave him three days grace to see sense, and back down. But Felix prayed and

became only more certain that this was a conflict between the commandments of God and the commandments of men.

At the end of the three days Felix was referred to the proconsul. He still refused to hand over his Scriptures. His last words in public were memorable "God, I thank you. I have passed 56 years in this world. I have preserved my chastity; I have observed the Gospels; I have preached the faith and the truth. Lord God of heaven and earth, Jesus Christ, I bend my neck as a sacrifice for you, who abides for ever." He was condemned to be beheaded at Carthage, and became one of the first martyrs to die under Diocletian.

Needless to say, Diocletian did not succeed in destroying the Scriptures. Today there are hundreds of millions of copies around the world, and this month, Sunday, 23rd October, Christians will thank God for the Scriptures when they celebrate Bible Sunday.

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26th October: Alfred the Great, King of the West Saxons

Can you think of a politician who deserves to be called a saint? If no one currently living politician comes to mind, never mind – there is always King Alfred of Wessex (871-99).

This remarkable and best known of all the Anglo-Saxon rulers may have dozed off and let some cakes burn while a peasant woman was hiding him from the Vikings, but he did so much else which was of lasting good for the Anglo-Saxon people.

It was a desperate time for the Anglo-Saxons – the kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia had fallen to the Vikings. Only Alfred's province remained free. Through some inspired military maneuvering, Alfred managed to keep them at bay. As a Christian, he became the defender of all Christian Anglo-Saxons against the pagan Vikings. (His son and grandsons went on to conquer the Vikings, and thus ensured the future unity of England.)

Alfred was also a scholar, and was admired certain writings which had laid down models of ideal Christian kingship. He tried to put these principles into practise, such as producing a law-code. Alfred believed strongly that anyone in authority should have to study in order to learn how to govern. Not such a bad idea for leaders today!

Alfred was never canonised by the Church, but his translation of Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius is often thought to be a fitting epitaph: *I desired to live worthily as long as I lived, and to leave after my life, to the men who should come after me, the memory of me in good works.*

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27th October: Odran of Iona - fought over by the spirits

Odran is a suitable saint to remember as Halloween approaches, for his story involves the spirit world.

British by birth, Odran (died c. 563) was one of Columba's first companions on Iona. Sadly, he died not long after his arrival on the island. But Columba found comfort, for in a vision he saw Odran's soul ascending to heaven, after being fought over by angels and devils. Christ had redeemed Odran for His own, and so all the devils there ever were could not lay claim to Odran's soul.

In memory of his dear friend, Columba named the graveyard on Iona after him, Reilig Orain. An old Irish tradition has an Odran abbot of Meath and founder of Latteragh (Co. Tipperary), and it is probable that these Odrans are one and the same.

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28th October: Simon and Jude - warning against moral infections

Jude the apostle and martyr (1st century) warns us in his epistle that not all 'evil' comes in the form of obvious ghosties and ghoulies. He writes instead to warn the Christians of the greater danger of people who infect others with heresy and moral failure. He writes that they are nothing more than "blemishes on your love-feasts...feeding themselves. They are waterless clouds carried along by the winds; autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame, wandering stars, for whom the deepest darkness has been reserved forever."

Such dangerous people can be frightening, but Jude also encourages his readers to remember "...him who is able to keep you from falling and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing...the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power and authority, before all time, now and forever..."

According to Western tradition, Jude and Simon went to preach the gospel in Persia, where both were martyred.

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30th October: Alphonsus Rodriguez - when life takes everything you value

If you have done your best to live 'right', and still had nothing but trouble and heartache in your life, Alphonsus is the saint for you. He was born in 1533, the son of a wool merchant in Segovia. He followed his father into the profession, married, and had two children. He was a responsible person. Then - his wife died, his children died, and the business failed. By the time he was 38, Alphonsus had lost everything - through no fault of his own. In 1571 he entered the Jesuit order, and was sent to the college of Montesione (Majorca). They decreed he should be a hall porter - and so he was, for the rest of his life.

We can only surmise the grief, despair and anger that Alphonsus must have struggled with at times. All we know is that at some point, he discovered he was still able to salvage something from the wreck of his life. For the surviving accounts of Alphonsus describe him as a prayerful, self-sacrificing, obedient man. Indeed, his character was so remarkable that it bore fruit more widely than he could ever have imagined, and down the years many sought out that hall porter for counselling over the heartbreaks of their own lives. God honoured Alphonsus' faith in Him, and the famous poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, centuries later, wrote a poem in which he praises Alphonsus as an example of holiness realised in and through the duties of an unspectacular, humdrum life.

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31st October: All Hallows Eve - or Holy Evening

Modern Halloween celebrations have their roots with the Celtic peoples of pre-Christian times.

In those long-ago days, on the last night of October, the Celts celebrated the Festival of Samhain, or 'Summer's End'. The priests, or Druids, performed ceremonies to thank and honour the sun. For there was a very dark side to all this: Samhain also signalled the onset of winter, a time when it was feared that unfriendly ghosts, nature-spirits, and witches roamed the earth, creating mischief. So the Druid priests lit great bonfires and performed magic rites to ward off or appease these dark supernatural powers.

Then the Romans arrived, and brought their Harvest Festival which honoured the Goddess Pomona with gifts of apples and nuts. The two festivals slowly merged.

When Christianity arrived still later, it began to replace the Roman and Druid religions. 1st November - All Saints' Day - was dedicated to all Christian Martyrs and Saints who had died. It was called 'All Hallows' Day'. The evening before became an evening of prayer and preparation and was called 'All Hallows' Eve', The Holy Evening, later shortened to 'Halloween'.

For many centuries, however, fear of the supernatural remained strong. During the Middle Ages, animal costumes and frightening masks were worn to ward off the evil spirits of darkness on Halloween. Magic words and charms were used to keep away bad luck, and everybody believed that witches ride about on broomsticks. Fortune telling was popular, and predicting the future by the use of nuts and apples was so popular that Halloween is still sometimes known as Nutcrack Night or Snap-Apple Night.

Today, Christians have learned to turn to prayer instead of charms to overcome the powers of darkness. And the deeper, true meaning of All Hallows' Eve, should not be forgotten. As Christians, we all draw closer to Christ when we remember and give thanks for our loved ones and for others who have gone before us through the gates of death.