

29th February

Memory Verse:

Gather my saints together unto me;
those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice.

Psalm 50:5

This verse explains to us who are God's saints. Jesus Christ is our sacrifice if we are Christians and so we are saints! More details in the lesson for 1st March.

Today

February 29 Leap Day

Today is a most unusual day. If today is your birthday you might say that you have a birthday only once every four years! But why do we have leap years?

It takes approximately 365 *and a quarter* days – not 365 days – for the Earth to orbit the Sun. We call this a solar year. As we need a whole number of days in a year, we round the days in a calendar year down to 365. But what about the partial day? If every year was just 365 days, the calendar would drift and the seasons and the date would begin to get out of step with each other. That is exactly what happened until 45 BC when Julius Caesar decided to

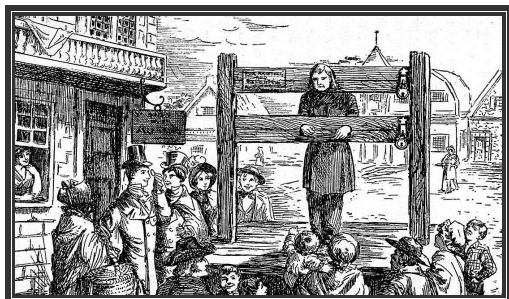
put things right.

Julius Caesar's rule for leap years was a simple one: add an extra day or “leap day” every four years. His calendar is called Julian after him. It is still only an approximate solution and it drifted out of line with the earth's rotation by about three days in every 400 years.

And there matters of the calendar remained for hundreds of years. To find out what happened next you need to wait until the lesson for 14th September!

I have put a little song that will help younger ones remember the months of the year and how many days they all have in today's Optional Resources files.¹ Don't forget your diary on this extra day!

Two great Christians to read about: Benjamin Keach and Patrick Hamilton



Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) was born on 29th February. He was a much loved minister of the Gospel who served at a time when things were very difficult for Christians in Britain – as you can see from the picture of him on the left. The story of these terrible times and how they came to an end in 1688 is told in the lessons for 6th July (Sedgemoor and its aftermath) and 5th November (the Glorious Revolution).

To understand Keach's life you need to know that after the Commonwealth period (1649-1660) before 1688, meetings of dissenters – those who could not in conscience be members of the Church of England – were at best restricted and at worst illegal and punishable by crippling fines, imprisonment or transportation to slave colonies in the West Indies. Various laws were also put in place to try to prevent the dissenters from educating their children in the faith. It was this last

¹ Song from the *Mothers' Companion* flashdrive available from <https://motherscompanion.weebly.com/>

prohibition that landed Keach in the pillory for he had written a book for children, *The Child's Instructor, or a New and Easy Primer*.

On the pillory at Aylesbury Mr. Keach defended himself and the truth with great boldness. The jailer frequently interrupted him and finally the sheriff himself threatened to have him gagged. The people, contrary to custom, had no words of mockery for the good, persecuted minister, and no offensive missile was hurled at him. An Episcopal minister who ventured to assail Mr. Keach in the pillory was immediately reproached by the people with the ungodliness of his own life, and his voice was drowned in laughter. When the minister cried aloud, 'You see what your errors have brought you to' someone in the crowd shouted back, 'Do you remember when you were pulled drunk out of the ditch?' to which another in the crowd yelled, 'or that time that you were found under the haycock?' The crowds then burst into laughter and the minister retreated amongst them. Again at Winslow, where Keach was then living, he suffered the same shameful penalty, and a copy of his little book was burned."²

Benjamin Keach was one of the best known baptist ministers of his day. He encouraged his people to sing hymns in a day when that was not the norm in England. Every time you sing a hymn you should be grateful to God for Benjamin Keach.

Benjamin Keach had no theological training whatever but he prayerfully studied God's word until he had a deep understanding of it and so was able to preach with power and guide his flock in difficult times. In this he is an example to us all.

It was in the Baptist church in Winslow in Buckinghamshire where he had been converted that Benjamin Keach first began to preach although he was never the minister there. This chapel still stands today and can be visited by appointment.³ It would make a grand family outing if you live within travelling distance.

In 1668 Keach was called to pastor the Baptist congregation that met in Southwark, London. Here he remained for the rest of his life and you will see from the dates I have given you that he spent many years ministering in the days before the Glorious Revolution brought liberty to dissenters. No copies exist today of the "little book" that caused him to be put in the pillory (although many of his other works survive) but I would love to have seen what was in it wouldn't you?



As a lad of fourteen Patrick Hamilton (1504-1528) was sent from his native Scotland to Paris to study at the university. It changed his life – as you might imagine – but not in a way anyone would have expected. For in Paris Patrick came into contact with the teaching of Martin Luther, the great reformer about whose ideas we will learn more in the lessons for 16th July and 31st October.

Luther's findings had been sending shock-waves through Europe. Through reading the Bible he had discovered that the way to heaven is not through one's own good works. It is through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that we can have forgiveness for our sins and peace with God. Unsurprisingly (to us at any rate)

Luther was demanding that people be allowed to read the Bible – then they could see for themselves that what he was saying was true.

When Patrick finished his studies in 1524 he returned to St Andrews University in Scotland. Here he became a professor. Luther's books were banned the very next year but the days were gone when books had to be laboriously copied by hand. Now the craft of printing was invented and there were

² James Hamilton, *Our Christian Classics: Readings from the Best Divines*, (London: James Nisbet and Co.), pp. 264-267.

³ There is no charge for visiting. See <http://www.keachsmeeinghouse.org.uk/Visitor.shtml>

many copies of Luther's works in St Andrews that escaped the eyes of the authorities. Along with them were copies of William Tyndale's great work, the New Testament translated from Greek into English which was brand new in 1525.

Patrick was convinced: Luther was right. He turned his back on the old darkness and embraced the light that seemed so new – though it had been shining since before the dawn of time. As a result, St Andrews was no longer a safe place for him. News got around and he began to be investigated by Archbishop James Beaton. Patrick fled for his life to Germany.

It was in Germany that Patrick wrote his most well-known and enduring book. When Patrick wrote it he wrote it in Latin but when the English associate of Tyndale, John Frith, translated it into English he called it *Patrick's Places*. Later John Fox included it in his famous *Acts and Monuments* and so it became known all over Britain. In the book Patrick set out plainly the truth that we cannot save ourselves by our good works nor will God accept us because of them. He reasoned clearly from Scripture that we can only be saved through faith in Jesus Christ.

Then came the hard decision. Patrick loved his native Scotland. He wanted the Scottish people to know the truth. But his life was not safe in Scotland. What should he do? How could he preach the precious message to Scotland if he was in Germany? He decided to go home.

Patrick went back to Scotland. He preached. His brother and sister were saved and then many others. The Archbishop soon found out what was going on, however, and sent for Patrick. Meanwhile, those who had accused him to the Archbishop gave him leave to preach at the university. They knew that in this way they could listen to him and gather the evidence they needed to make their accusations before the Archbishop stick. God has promised that his word will not “return unto him void” (Isaiah 55:11) so this idea certainly backfired: many notable people were converted as a result.

On the 29th of February 1528 Patrick appeared before the Archbishop on trial. Faithful in the face of the threat of the terrible punishment of being burnt to death, Patrick did not deny what he had preached.

He was accordingly sentenced to death and, to be sure that nothing would be done to rescue him, the sentence was carried out that very same day.

The news that a good man had been so cruelly killed spread through Scotland like wildfire. Far from being a warning it was an inspiration. Why had he died? people asked. As a result the very ideas that the Archbishop wanted to suppress became yet more widely known. Look out for the lesson on 2nd of May when you can read how the death of Patrick Hamilton (and other events in Scotland) led to the Reformation in Scotland in the days of John Knox.