**Newman and his sisters**

John Henry Newman was the eldest of a family of six. He had two brothers, Francis and Charles and three sisters- Harriet, Jemima and Mary the youngest was born in 1809 and so was 8 years younger than John Henry.

Newman was a devoted son and had a happy upbringing. Newman’s father was declared bankrupt in 1821 and died 4 years later when Newman was twenty four. This meant that John Henry had to assume a paternal role and was responsible for securing the family’s economic welfare, a role that would continue until 1836 the year of his mother’s death and the marriages of his two surviving sisters Jemima and Harriet

I would like this evening, to discuss briefly, his relationship with his sisters-how they got on together.

Newman’s youngest sister Mary, whom he loved so much, died unexpectedly at the age nineteen. Mary’s death had a profound effect on Newman and was probably the greatest emotional loss of his life. In a beautiful letter to Robert Wilberforce, written just a few days after her death, he described in detail that terrible event...how Mary was taken ill at dinner…how on the following day at around 5pm they became aware that she was in imminent danger, how, Newman said, given the strength of her religious principle, they hesitated not for an instant to acquaint her with her grave state. He explained, how she expressed her desire to live and be with them and have time, and as Newman put it…” to be more meet for heaven and more like Christ”, yet given her faith in Him as her only Saviour, it was her conviction that to depart and be with Him was far better. Newman concluded his letter, saying how in her final hours “she had received great comfort from being able to recite to herself Keble’s hymns..And so she departed”

To Newman, her death was he said “a most bitter affliction” and one that he would refer to for the rest of his life. Indeed 50 years later writing a letter of condolence to Pusey on the death of his granddaughter he added the comment “I do not exaggerate when I say that I have not even now got over my sister’s death”. I think that it would be correct to say that there was no one in his life that he loved so much and for so long. Mary was gifted he said with “that singular sweetness and affectionateness of temper” .. “that she lived in an ideal world of happiness the very sight of which made others happy”. Another reason for the deep hurt her he suffered on the passing of Mary, may be gleaned from a journal entry he made a few weeks after her death. “For some weeks I have had a presentiment more or less strong that we should lose dear Mary. I was led to this by her extreme loveliness of character and by the circumstances of my great affection for her” I seem to say to myself not so much “will you live?” as “ how strange you are still alive” In the months immediately after Mary’s death, when he rode in the countryside he felt more intensely what he called “the transitory nature of the world” . He said “Dear Mary seems embodied in every tree and hid behind every hill” and then a metaphor he often used later, “what a veil this world of beauty is! Beautiful, but still a veil.”Apart from religious feasts there was no anniversary that Newman noted so frequently over the years as that of the death of his sister Mary. eg in 1860 writing to his sister Jemima he said “Mary would be above fifty now had she lived. How wonderful it seems when the only picture the mind can form of her is of a young girl”

But what of his relationship with his living sisters Harriet and Jemima? In his earlier years he corresponded warmly with them eg writing to Harriet in 1828 he declared “No calamity, I think could occur to me here so great, as to lose your love and confidence” and yet that was what happened in the mid 1840’s when they became completely estranged. The first reason for this was that Harriet believed that Newman was trying to persuade her husband Tom Mozley to become a Roman Catholic. In fact the opposite was the case as Nweman had tried to dissuade Mozley from converting. But even when Harriet became aware of this she still blamed her brother for what she referred to as her husband’s attack of “Roman fever” She was disillusioned by her brothers move towards the Roman church. In letters to her sister Jemima she referred to his joining Rome as being like a “disgraceful marriage” Three months after her brother had converted in a letter to her sister Jemima she showed her anger at his decision… “ the flagrant evil of his present step, as regards himself, is acting against his reason, and knowing it. If a man of reason ( which JHN especially is) acts against his reason, suffer he must and ought..he has made a most disgraceful match-the consequence of which he must bear” One consequence was that Newman and his sister Harriet fell out and were still estranged at the time of her death in 1852.

Newman’s relationship with Jemima who was five years younger, than him was the lengthiest and while not without disappointment on either side, they remained in fairly regular contact until Jemima’s death in 1879. Newman wrote affectionate letters to Jemima from boarding school, from Oxford and while on his Italian travels. He showed his appreciation of her in a letter congratulating her on her engagement. “All I know is, that if, as the guiding of God’s Providence probably will be found to lie, you resolve on what you consider in your note as possible, brother never had a greater loss or another a greater gain. I have been thinking, praying, dreaming of you ever since-You must be a blessing wherever you are etc.”

Not surprisingly Newman’s gradual movement towards the Roman Catholic church alarmed Jemima. However she was more sympathetic and understanding than her sister Harriet. In early 1845, Newman began to warn people that he might be leaving the Church of England before year end. He wrote to Jemima in March to say he could not afford to wait much longer. She replied that the news of his likely entrance to the Roman Catholic church, though not unexpected, struck her like hearing that a friend must die. However she did acknowledge that whatever he decided would be on “true and right principles that will carry a blessing with them”.

Newman was hurt by his family’s behaviour and he felt that Jemima was acting as their mouthpiece. He certainly showed his hurt in a letter to Jemima in august 1846 saying “when my great trial came, my own relations, and they only, were those who could find the heart, or the want of reverence, to write censoriously to me.” Later in the letter he says “you were their organ; for I will not believe that it was you, though it was your hand, in answer to my own affectionate and confidential letters of many months, that wrote to me in so cruel a way”. Despite Newman’s outburst friendly letters continued to pass between them. Even in 1863 while writing as he said from morning till night to produce the Apologia he found time to write to Jemima to thank her for the marmalade “better than any other I have ever ate” but added that “it is only a luxury, so you should not go on sending it” But it seems the sensitive Newman had not forgotten his hurts. When in 1865 Jemima, at last, invited him to visit her in Derby he wrote a reply which Fr Roderick Strange in his recent Newman book describes as a “fierce letter which rankles with hurt”. Not alone did he refuse to accept Jemima’s invitation to visit, but listed again how often she and her husband had treated him coldly over the years.

I have seen Jemima described as a remarkable woman..well she certainly must have been a very mature lady who understood her brother very well because she does not seem to have taken any offence. Indeed she visited him in 1867 and it was a very pleasant occasion. Jemima played Beethoven’s sonatas on the piano, and Newman accompanied her on the violin. The reconciliation was certainly complete when Newman visited her four years later in 1871. The death of Jemima, his last surviving sister, on Christmas Day 1879, was not unexpected news for Newman. He remarked how he had shared with her a memory for dates but, he said “now I am the only one who knows a hundred things most interesting to me..eg yesterday was the anniversary of Mary’s death-my mind turned at once to Jemima but she was away”

I mentioned earlier that Newman was still estranged from his sister Harriet at the time of her death in 1852 but that too was to have a sad but still happy ending.

Harriet had one child Grace, who had married and emigrated to Australia. She was home on holiday in August 1890 and requested to meet Newman. His brief note of welcome to her was the last letter he wrote. They met on august 9th. Because of the estrangement with her mother he had not seen Grace since she was three years old, forty seven years previously. Grace wrote an account of the meeting saying “He was very kind, holding my hand in his all the time…and closed her remarks saying ..”at last he gave me, as he does to all visitors, a blessing” Two days later on August 11th Newman passed away.