

‘St Alban, pray for us’ – A Homily for Trinity II

*“For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment,
‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another,
take care that you are not consumed by one another.”*

Wednesday was the feast of St Alban, when the church celebrates England’s protomartyr, that is, the first person in our country to have knowingly been killed for their Christian faith. Alban was a Romano-British pagan living sometime around the 3rd to 4th century CE., in what was then known as Verulamium, but today is the eponymously titled town of St Albans, in Hertfordshire.

The story of Alban’s martyrdom begins when he takes pity on a Christian priest fleeing religious persecution at the hands of the Roman empire. Despite not being a Christian himself, Alban takes the priest into his own home and shelters him from the authorities, a small but extraordinarily courageous act of kindness, the legacy of which so inspired the ancient people of this land that it helped form the very foundations of Christianity in England.

We don’t know for how long the priest took refuge in Alban’s home, only that the time they spent together had a profound impact on the would-be Saint, as he grew in admiration for his fugitive houseguest and his forbidden faith. This is a common theme in the early history of the church: people encountering Christians for the first time and being transformed by the experience. By engaging with these weird new cultists who only worshiped one God, and who claimed to love their enemies, and who shared all things in common, the citizens of the Roman Empire encountered what Paul calls in this morning’s reading, the ‘Fruits of the Spirit’. They met people who sought to lead lives marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And exposure to this radical, countercultural understanding of what it means to be alive inspired countless early converts to Christianity, including Alban himself.

Eventually, someone tipped off the authorities who raided Albans home in search of the priest. Alban, however, had received word that the guards were on their way and

swapped clothes with the priest so that he might be taken in his place. Upon being brought before the local ruler, Alban's deceit was uncovered, but he refused to give up the priest or to renounce his new faith in the living God. He was subsequently tortured before being beheaded a top small hill where a shrine was later built in his memory. This shrine grew into one of the most significant centres of Pilgrimage in England and today rests within St Albans Cathedral, where yesterday, along with the rest of the town and visitors from around the world, they celebrated the story of their foundation with the annual pilgrimage and re-enactment of Alban's life in a joyous parade, marching through the streets of that ancient and holy place.

St Alban then is a preeminent figure in English Christianity and is often celebrated amongst the Patron Saints of the British Isles themselves, just as he is in our own wonderful reredos behind me, standing as he does in the company of Saints Andrew, David, Patrick and George. Many indeed argue that Alban would have been a much more fitting Patron Saint of England, but he isn't. What he is the Patron Saint of however is Tortured people and Refugees. And so it was remarkably fitting that his feast this year fell in the same week that the government was attacking the church of England, and threatening to expel its Bishops from the house of Lords for daring to criticise its botched plans to deport refugees to Rwanda.

According to our government, the forced deportation of desperate and traumatised people seeking refuge on our shores is, in fact, a distinctly English pastime, and indeed, represents the will of the English people. Whilst, conversely, we in the Church of England are accused of seeking to subvert that will in pursuit of our own politically correct, woke, snowflake, virtue signalling, whatever other inverted pejorative they're currently peddling, agenda.

And this is the heart of the problem we face today: our oldest Saint and martyr, a figure venerated in this land for over 1500 years, who stands at the intersection of English identity, encompassing as he does faith, history, folk-lore, story, song, art, architecture, even our very geography, is the Patron Saint of Refugees and Tortured people. St Alban, the Earliest and arguably most significant English Saint is remembered for welcoming a

stranger in need, he is the Patron Saint of the very same refugees and torture victims who were sat on that plane to Rwanda and who we are currently being encouraged to wash our hands of in the name of sovereignty and national identity.

A division is being intentionally wrought in our communities by those in power. They seek to turn us against each other with deliberately divisive policies, to stoke fear and resentment with hate filled rhetoric and lies. They claim to be patriots yet seem to care nothing for the customs and traditions of this land; even when criticized as they were this past week by the English courts, English Bishops and even the future King of England himself, they persist in undermining the proud heritage of England with their ruinous and entirely self-serving brand of populism.

It is important at this point to clarify that I don't believe that the English are the 'best' at hospitality and welcome, that we are somehow uniquely placed as a global exemplar of how to care for refugees. It is, after all, the childish and distinctly unchristian rhetoric of being a world beating nation which has landed us in this mess in the first place. Even a cursory knowledge of our history, from the slave trade to Windrush, serves to demonstrate not only that we've very often gotten this very wrong, but indeed, that those occasions where upon we have arguably been 'world beating', were the lowest points in our collective history, wherein we caused the untold suffering and death of millions of people around the world in pursuit of profit and empire. No, I'm merely pointing out that, thanks to the story of St Alban, concern for strangers and those in need has been a key component of our national identity for over a thousand years, as generations of English people have aspired to his selfless example of love and compassion.

George Orwell (another celebrated Englishman who's legacy the current government would rather pretend doesn't exist) perhaps best describes the distinction I'm clumsily seeking to draw when he wrote, '*A Patriot is someone who loves their own country, a nationalist is someone who hates everyone else's.*'

To love ones nation is to be fully secure in the knowledge and understanding of all that it is and stands for, the good and the bad, without need for comparison or one upmanship. We can celebrate the cultural and spiritual legacy of our nation and of a figure

like St Alban without descending into petty competition with other countries. And indeed, we must, because our story, the story of this land has been hijacked by nationalists who twist it to meet their own selfish ends, who wish to reduce the identity of our nation to nothing more than a petty opposition to all other expressions of culture and tradition, to a violent and ugly rejection of anything which they decide is other.

Nationalism stands for nothing, it can exist only against something, and so must perpetually produce enemies to fight against in order to survive. It is through this process that we are being turned one against the other. As St Paul says, "*We bite and devour one another, until we are consumed by one another.*"

We are members of the Church of England, charged with being the body of Christ in this place, in this land. A difficult and dangerous calling, yet, a calling which we believe defines our very being. We are the latest in the long line of English Saints, an unbroken chain from St Alban to ourselves via countless lives of loving service, and are each of us members of the great cloud of witnesses, sustained and distinguished by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are custodians of the life and witness of Christ's church in this land, we hold the stories of scripture and the Saints, stories lovingly passed down to us through generations of faithful believers, committed to the way of love. Stories which have so taken root in our souls that we turn up here, in these ancient places of persistent prayer, every Sunday morning to repledge our commitment to the truths which they hold and to one another. Stories of love over hate, of joy over fear, of peace over violence, stories of patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. "*For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'*"

This is the story of our faith, this is the story of our community, this is who the English people, of all faiths and none, have, at their best, aspired to be since the very first pilgrims visited that small shrine on a hillside outside Verulamium over a thousand years ago, drawn there by the tale of a courageous Saint who gave his life to protect a stranger in need, and I for one am damned if I'm going to let this government or any other seek to subvert that truth.

I'll end with the words of our Bishops, who I was incredibly proud to see united in their commitment to the legacy of the Christian faith in this land as they wrote...

'Our Christian heritage should inspire us to treat asylum seekers with compassion, fairness and justice, as we have for centuries... These are the people Jesus had in mind as he said when we offer hospitality to a stranger, we do it for him. They are the vulnerable that the Old Testament calls us to value.'

Let us pray the collect for St Alban

Eternal Father,

when the gospel of Christ first came to our land

you gloriously confirmed the faith of Alban

by making him the first to win a martyr's crown:

grant that, following his example,

in the fellowship of the saints

we may worship you, the living God,

and give true witness to Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,

who is alive and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever.

Amen