

Votive Mass of St Alban the Martyr

25th October 2025

'I am Alban, and I worship the One True God'

2Tim 2; 3: *if we have died with Him we shall also live with Him.*

Jn 12: 24–26: *whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. .*

This church of SS Alban & Stephen has huge significance for me: it's where my Mum was baptized — indeed, received all her sacraments, including her Marriage to Dad in 1965 — and had her funeral too; my sister & brother & I were each confirmed in this church; and I was ordained priest here on 4th September 1999. A place of great importance to me, and I am so glad to have gathered you here today; a few of you of have been here before, with me, for day pilgrimages to St Albans, and for my Silver Jubilee ... but it's wonderful to have you here in greater numbers today to honour St Alban. I started living in this city when I was 10 yrs old, and I know the story of St Alban & St Albans so well ... I'm sure I would have had to do essays and projects on it since right back in Yr 6. It's a compelling narrative, and an uplifting one; we can steep ourselves in this sacred history of an inspiring saint today as we make our pilgrimage. Later on, after we've had our lunch, I'll give a more detailed talk on the saint and the

shrine that grew up around his place of martyrdom in the 3rd c. — but for now let's celebrate his witness liturgically, honouring his giving up of life for Jesus Christ.

St Alban's actual feast day is back in June. Traditionally it was kept on June 22nd, and the Church of England — and this city — still keeps it on that day; but we as Catholics shifted it because of the martyrdom date of St John Fisher, 22nd June 1535 ... so in the 20th c. it made way for the feast of SS John Fisher & Thomas More, and we moved St Alban slightly, to 20th June. But today we keep his feast in a liturgical sense through celebrating a 'votive Mass' in honour of St Alban, and we have just heard the Scripture readings given for this great martyr, the proto-martyr of England.

St Alban died during the Roman period of our English history, when the Emperor and his vast jurisdiction was not yet Christianized but the faith was beginning to spread out across the Empire even so. It was a dangerous mission, to preach the Gospel, and it would be some 3 more centuries at least (c. 600AD) before Christian

missionaries would be more welcome in this country, with the arrival of Roman monks in Kent and Celtic monks in Northumberland. But at the time of Alban, the Catholic priest that he met, and whom he sheltered, was at great risk for his life. Alban the soldier chose to protect him, and was so impressed by his faith that he converted, and was subsequently himself martyred, in place of the priest. Alban's traditionally quoted testimony that he is supposed to have uttered in his defence was: "*I am Alban, and I worship the One True God.*" This he said in the face of threats against him if he did not conform and agree to offer sacrifices to the Roman deities in the local pagan temple. Where we will go this afternoon, to his shrine, is the hill outside the Roman city where his beheading is thought to have occurred ... 1700, if not nearer 1800, yrs ago.

The whole tradition of Christian martyrdom is rich and poignant. Beginning with St Stephen the Jerusalem deacon, the very first martyr (and co-patron of this parish church), martyrdom continues bravely right down to our own day — think of the 21 Coptic martyrs slain on the

beach in Libya by ISIS in 2015, or of Fr Frans van der Lugt, Dutch Jesuit, killed for refusing to evacuate his home of some 35yrs in Homs, Syria, in 2014. No-one justly seeks martyrdom by sheer recklessness, but only by courage and faith in the face of opposition to one's Christian practice and charity. And this is in keeping with what Our Lord both promised and predicted would be a hallmark of His apostles and all His Church, after the pattern of His own saving sacrifice. Jesus Himself avoided the threats of death for as long as He could — think of that cliff edge in Nazareth at the start of His ministry — but by the time of that Last Supper before the Passion "His hour had come." At that sacred Passover meal — which He transformed into the Holy Eucharist — as the Gospel of St John records it, He very much strengthened His apostles in their expectation of martyrdom: "*if it dies, [a grain of wheat] bears much fruit ... Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for the eternal life.*" To pay the ultimate price, to "give up one's life for [Christ and] one's friends," is to follow absolutely

in the footstep of Christ, i.e. the Way of the Cross. Our Lord made it clear in these words that martyrdom would necessarily be part and parcel of a true Christian faith, a sign that the Church is living its divine life. No wonder we honour the martyrs with even more admiration than all those other wonderful saints and confessors who have lived valiant selfless lives for their brothers and sisters in the name of Christ. Even more than all their lives' self-offering, we see in the deaths of the martyrs a greater self-sacrifice, and wonder ... would I also go there, or would I bail out? Would I just have gone to that pagan temple in the Roman City and given in to the Tribunal's insistence? Am I happy to compromise my faith, or my morals, to conform with the insistence of voices that are from the world and not from God? Or am I ready, with God's help, and strengthened with prayers despite my weakness, to say with St Alban, "I worship [only] the One True God," and none of the so-called gods of this present age? Will we be tested to that great degree? And do we love Jesus already so much that we could not think of denying Him, or going

against His Holy Church? St Alban needed just a few weeks (or was it *days*) hearing from the Christian priest he harboured to be so convinced of the Truth of the Gospel that he was ready to die for it. And we? With all the benefits we have of some (many) *years* in the Church, are we as ready?

St Paul reiterated the Christian principle that Jesus gave His apostles: "*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" If we're serious about being young active Catholics, then this will become true, if it is not already true: persecution from those who insist that we conform to greed, misuse of money, sexual promiscuity, abortion etc. Yes, this persecution will follow if we insist instead on conforming ourselves to Christ. But if we die to ourselves, and adopt the attitude of the martyrs — Christ before all else and above all else, even at the risk of our mortal life — then the words of St Paul, reflecting on his own life's travails, will blissfully become true in ours: "*If we have died with Him, then we shall live with Him; if we hold firm, we shall reign with Him.*"