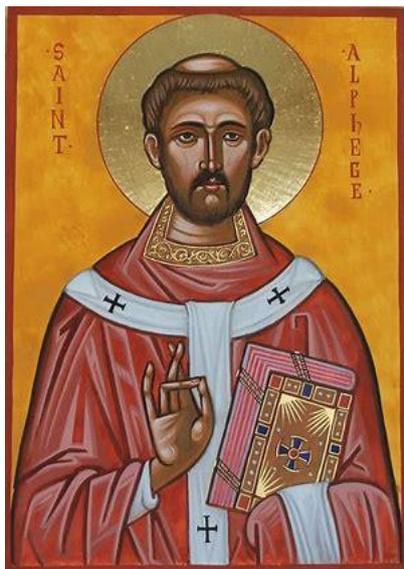


ST ALPHEGE



Psalm 3

- 1 Lord, how many are my adversaries; •
many are they who rise up against me.
- 2 Many are they who say to my soul, •
'There is no help for you in your God.'
- 3 But you, Lord, are a shield about me; •
you are my glory, and the lifter up of my head.
- 4 When I cry aloud to the Lord, •
he will answer me from his holy hill;
- 5 I lie down and sleep and rise again, •
because the Lord sustains me.
- 6 I will not be afraid of hordes of the peoples •
that have set themselves against me all around.
- 7 Rise up, O Lord, and deliver me, O my God, •
for you strike all my enemies on the cheek
and break the teeth of the wicked.
- 8 Salvation belongs to the Lord: •
may your blessing be upon your people.

This psalm is one of the psalms used for festivals when we celebrate the lives of martyrs. I noticed that today we commemorate St Alphege. I was interested to see that he lived during the reign of Alfred the Great which is one of the periods which I find most interesting. You may, like me, have read the stories by Bernard Cornwell about the fictitious Uhtred of Bebbenburg set in these most interesting of times.

As I read about Alphege, I recognised the times he lived in and so here is his biography.

Alphege was a monk from the monastic community at Deerhurst, and for some years was a hermit near Glastonbury. He became Abbot of Bath before succeeding Ethelwold as Bishop of Winchester in 984. During this time he was known for both his frugal lifestyle and his generosity to others.

The early part of the tenth century was the second major period of Viking raids against England. In 954 King Ethelred the Unready sent Alphege as a peace envoy to the Danes. (Unready does not mean that Ethelred was always unprepared, but rather that he would not accept 'rede' or counsel from his advisers.) This was a mission that was initially successful for both State and Church, bringing peace. In 1006, Alphege became Archbishop of Canterbury.

However, in later years Danish invasions increased, and the south of England was largely overrun by the Vikings. In 1012 Canterbury was surrounded and captured by Vikings who were aided by the treachery of Archdeacon Elfmaer. Alphege was imprisoned and a ransom

was demanded for him from his citizens. The sum required was far greater than anything the tenants of the Canterbury estates were able to pay. Alphege, known as a man of justice and charity, refused to allow himself to be ransomed for such a vast sum of money. Infuriated, and in a drunken frenzy, the Danes murdered him, cutting his body to pieces with an axe. As news of his death spread Alphege came to be thought of as a national hero. According to tradition the parish church of St Alfege (sic) in Greenwich was built on the site of his martyrdom.

Alphege is remembered as a martyr because he gave his life standing up for Christian justice. He sought the good of others over that of himself, and forbade others to suffer in order to save him.

(Extract from *Saints on Earth: A biographical companion to Common Worship* by John H Darch and Stuart K Burns.)

There are many lessons to be learned from the lives of the Saints even though many of them lived in times quite different from ours. We can still assess our own attitude to others in the light of what St Alphege did and of course around the world there are still many Christians who suffer from for their faith as he did.

So let us end with today's collect:

Merciful God,
who raised up your servant Alphege
to be a pastor of your people
and gave him grace to suffer for justice and true religion:
grant that we who celebrate his martyrdom
may know the power of the risen Christ in our hearts
and share his peace in lives offered to your service;
through 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.