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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : 2nd Sunday after Trinity ~ June 25, 2017

Yesterday I travelled to St Albans to take part in the annual festival to celebrate the life of St Alban, the first Christian martyr of Britain. Some years ago, the Dean of St Albans proposed that St Alban should replace St George as England's Patron Saint and many thought he had a point – not least because at least St Alban was English. So what do we know about him?

Alban was a Briton who lived in Verulamium under Roman rule in about 250 AD who gave hospitality and courtesy and generosity to a Christian priest called Amphibilus who was fleeing from persecution. Influenced by the priest's prayer and teaching, Alban became a Christian. When the authorities discovered the priest's hiding place, Alban exchanged clothes with him and allowed the priest to escape. Alban was duly arrested and was condemned to receive the punishment due to the priest, if he had indeed become a Christian. Alban declared his Christian faith, saying in words still used in the Abbey as a prayer today: *'I worship and adore the true and living God, who created all things'*. Alban refused to acknowledge the Roman gods and was sentenced to death – and was taken up a hill to the site of execution where he was beheaded. 500 years later, the historian the Venerable Bede tells us that 'when the peace of Christian time was restored, a beautiful church worthy of his martyrdom was built, where sick folk are healed and frequent miracles take place to this day'. In later years the church also contained the shrine of Amphibilus, the priest whose life Alban had saved. In the early middle ages, pilgrims came in such numbers that St Albans became the premier Abbey in all England. Ever since those early times, people have continued to journey to St Albans Abbey to remember Alban and all he stands for and they come to pray for peace and healing and to seek God and yesterday's Pilgrimage celebrations attended by 1000's continued that tradition.

The story of Alban has captured the imagination of Christians down the ages, for of course the story continues to have great relevance to our own times, not least with regard to those Christians around the world find themselves facing violence and even death because of their profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

There are, I think, three lessons we can draw from the story of Alban. Firstly, Alban gave ready shelter and hospitality to the Christian priest. Secondly he was

open to the moving of God's spirit, as he listened to the priest's prayers and teaching and allowed himself to be converted to Christianity. Thirdly, without much thought, he was moved to put his new found faith to the test, by allowing the priest, Amphibilus, to escape and dying in his place.

Shelter and Hospitality – ever since its foundation the Church has tried to be an open and welcoming group of compassionate people of all ages, who are ready and willing to give hospitality to all comers – or, at any rate, should be. We are not a Club but a Church – we are not bound by narrow rules limiting membership for we are the living and active Body of Christ, ready to welcome all comers. The Church should always be an Open Door, an Inclusive Church and we should deplore the narrowness and exclusivity displayed by some sections of the Christian Church. The Church should be made up of people who know their need of God – who come as sinners, seeking God's forgiveness; who come in need, asking for God's help. If God can forgive sin, if God can offer help to all, why is it so hard for humans?

Open to God's Spirit – Alban was a firm believer in the Roman pagan gods – but not so sure of his belief that he was closed to the possibility of God's spirit moving into his life. Whatever our age, it is really never too late for us to be open to what God may be telling us, or calling us to do. Flexibility and not rigidity should be our watchword. That becomes harder the older we get – but it does not necessarily have to be so.

Allowing God to test our faith – it is highly unlikely that our faith will be put to the test in the extraordinary way that Alban's was. We are more likely to come up against apathy and indifference amongst others than we are torture and death. Yet we must not be blind to the fact that Christians throughout our world are still today persecuted for their faith – which should cause us both to pray earnestly for them and not to deny that we are Christ's.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tries to get across the message that the mission will not always be easy but his disciples must not be afraid, for they are inextricably linked with God through Jesus. Appropriately too today, I will baptise Eliana Victoria and will mark her with the sign of the cross, a sign she will keep for the rest of her life. I will baptise her with water, the sign of God's love immersing her life and then I will give her a candle to celebrate her birthday into the church. We don't just say words at a baptism but we do some very symbolic actions. And after that we pray that God will keep Eliana safe throughout her life, confident that her future is secure.

So give thanks for the life and example of St Alban and remember that God calls us to be people of warm generosity and hospitality, that God wants us to be

open to his Spirit and that, when we are tested in whatever way, we will be able to stand firm in the faith into which we have been baptised and in which we are living and growing.

And maybe you can repeat quietly the words which cost Alban his life in AD 250 - *'I worship and adore the true and living God, who created all things'*. May that be the motto for our lives as the true and faithful disciples of Christ in this Church in 2017?