

St Alban's Festival and Pilgrimage 2007

St Alban's Cathedral

The Venerable Mark Oakley

Before I begin my sermon I wonder if you'll permit me to say how privileged I feel, we all feel, to be here worshipping God alongside Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Jeffery John, the Dean. At a time when many of us are feeling increasingly homeless in an Anglican Church that I had always believed was built to be a large ark where every weird and wonderful animal had to budge over a bit to let another one find some straw, at such a time my energy is renewed and I believe I can hope again when I see these two brave Christians who at great cost have spoken up for human dignity in all its God-given diversity and colour. And I can't begin to preach any sermon until I say thank you to you both for being there – and now for being here. Thank you.

I pray that I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There was a Victorian Bishop here in England who left a rather unusual request in his will. He had penned a short verse and he asked for it to be read to his clergy on his death. It ran:

Tell my priests when I am gone

O'er me to shed no tears.

For I shall be no deader then

Than they have been for years.

Well, it is true that we clergy are not always the new creation we are invited to be. I remember one priest in the London Diocese who said his motto in life was *start each day with a smile – get it over with*. No wonder Nietzsche said that Christianity would be a lot more convincing if Christians actually looked redeemed!

But there must have been something about the priest who knocked one night on that door all those years ago pleading for safety. The owner of the house, Alban, was a soldier, so not one used to disobeying orders or stepping out of line. But something made him open that door and let this man in – hospitality? Curiosity? Humanity? We don't know but their consequent whispering hours together led Alban to re-think his life. We don't know how long they had together but when eventually the soldiers come to arrest the priest Alban put the priest's robe on himself, ready to take his place. In that short time together he had understood that a human self to be most itself is not selfish. It moved me this morning to think how easily I placed my alb and stole on, how was it for him that day?

At his trial Alban aligned himself to the Christian God and not to the gods of the day. He was consequently whipped and tortured and he still aligned himself to the God whose self-portrait, whose body-language, was Jesus Christ. Alban knew that God had stepped in his home and heart that night, in the form of a fearful man on the run. He was not going to deny what he had experienced. God is shared before he is understood. Alban was no

theologian, but he knew that life and love were enlarged by this faith that the priest was risking his own life for. And Alban understood that our deepest vocation is to be a witness to the glimpses of God we have been allowed to catch.

"What family and race are you?" asked the judge. "What concern is that?" asked Alban, "I am a Christian". "I am asking who you are", shouted the judge, "tell me now". "I am called Alban and I worship and adore the one true living God who created all things". And so the sword was sharpened and within a week of meeting, Alban and his unexpected friend, the priest, were both dead.

Why do we come then, all these hundreds of years later, to celebrate this man, to stand near his remains, to tell his story? Quite simply, we come here to fall in love again with our calling to be Christians, to recover, resuscitate and remember our first love of God – to scrub away the cynicism and resentments that paralyse – and to be refreshed by deeper resonances. To make sure, to use those resonant images from today's readings, that our hope is full of immortality, that our life is not remaining just a single grain.

Now, let's be honest, sometimes it is tempting to think that saints are really just dead sinners who have been dug up and edited. Don't call me a saint, said Dorothy Day, I don't want to be dismissed that easily. But Alban's story is as sharp as it ever was for it asks who or what is demanding our allegiance today, eclipsing the one true living God. It is easy to lay aside the pagan gods of Alban's time, but not always easy to recognise the power of the gods in our time. Let's not fool ourselves. The gods are still with us. There are many of them and they have many shrines but here are just four particularly active at the moment.

The first is called **Gloss**, the goddess of beauty and surfaces – a fickle being, incarnated in paper and adverts, a god so big she makes us all feel small and ugly. We are drawn by her siren voice but her perfection is impossible even for those who anoint themselves with her many sensuous creams and labels. She is cunning too – she makes humans confuse their wants for their needs and this leads to many tears. She teaches that life is survival of the fittest. Fit for what she never reveals. She makes objects into people and people into objects so in her adverts you can never work out if the man is having an affair with the woman or with the car. **Obese** is the god of gathering, of acquiring, who is never satisfied: happiness for him is having what you want not wanting what you have. And he always wants more even when bloated. Although people say he is seen on earth at the moment in the form of British children, in fact he is found in the hearts of parents and grandparents just as much over much of the world. He is related to that great god who makes us buy things we don't need called Ikea (mainly worshipped on a Saturday). Together they magic us into spending money we don't have on things we don't want in order to impress people we don't like.

Instantaneous is the goddess of now. She cannot wait. She must have fast cars, fast food, fast money, fast death. She is blind, never having the time to stop and see anything. She often gets into a mess too because she never has the patience to listen to anyone either. She beckons people to live full lives but strangely leaves them feeling empty. She is afraid of people meeting face to face in case they discover the joys of wasting time together, and so she invents screens and devices that trick us into thinking we are communicating but which actually add to our loneliness. She seduces with quick clarity and easy answers, and hates ambiguity, poetry, faith. And finally there is **Punch**, the god of violence and division. If hate

can be escalated he'll have a go – if they don't agree with you, lash out. If they're different, slap them down. If they're not in the majority, don't invite them. When in doubt, just punch them. Now obviously Punch is the creator of some computer games, street gangs, film directors and state leaders. Religious leaders are often drawn to his clarifying power too. But also, Punch can be a subtle god and can hide in the consensus of the middle classes, and his punch can be made, not of a fist but of plausible, respectable, articulate words. Punch can be very charming as he drives around in his bandwagon. He can make you feel better. And he loves to play a little trick – he likes to make people yawn whenever the conversation turns to human rights and responsibilities, refugees, the poor, the environment, equality – in fact, anything that Christians believe are close to God's heart. We need to resist Punch with every bit of energy we have.

These gods are alive and well and fracturing and splintering humanity. We need an Alban to call us back to the one living God, source of life and love. An Alban who offered himself, not to an institutionalised Jesus who pleases everyone, or no-one, but to the Jesus who questions all our answers, gently but relentlessly questioning who we have become: he is Aslan the de-froster. We need an Alban to tell us not to listen to all the stories that are being told to us by opinion columnists, the fashionable and the chic – and not to listen to the often damaging and unobjective stories we can begin to tell ourselves as a consequence, often beating ourselves up, shrinking into our low expectations. We need an Alban to tell us instead to listen to the story that God is telling us about ourselves, of our uniqueness and wonder, of our loveableness and forgivableness. God loves us exactly the way we are and God loves us so much he doesn't want us to stay like this. We are not made to be consumers but citizens, citizens of the Kingdom of God.

A day such as this reminds us that God turns existence into life, and life into a pilgrimage. And what he says to us he says to everyone, making us non-negotiable in our calling to love our God and our neighbour and so to maintain the dignity of difference and erase the scandal of indifference, practicing what we pray for. Alban declared he worshipped the one God who created all things. Such a God deserves a people who celebrate him by capacious souls, by a relentless capacity for friendships, and by a love that is frankly a bit reckless. Like Alban, it means opening doors, in ourselves and others, to see how God might strangely walk in.

I end with words by the Austrian poet Erich Fried:

It is nonsense, says reason

It is what it is says love.

It is unhappiness says reflection

It is nothing but pain says fear

It is hopeless says insight

It is what it is says love

It is ridiculous says pride

It is frivolous says caution

It is impossible says experience

It is what it is says love.

My name is Alban and I worship and adore the one true living God who created all things.