

Trinity I, 2022: St Alban: St Thomas on The Bourne.

'As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ.'

I want to tell you a story about bones...

In 429 two bishops visited Verulamium, a Roman city on the edge of what is now St Albans. The two bishops were Germanus of Auxerre (St Germain) and Lupus of Troyes. They had been sent to Britain from France to combat the British heresy of Pelagianism. Pelagius taught that human beings were not tainted by original sin and had the capacity to achieve perfection. A totally British view of God... and still around...I saw a sticker on a lamp post in Farnham a few days ago which said: 'Children are born compassionate and learn cruelty later.'

Well, the Church in France thought that this needed stamping out...it was a kind of early version of the EU trying to decide things for us. What was needed was European conformity....

So, Germanus and Lupus arrived but they had heard that in Britain there had been a famous martyr and they wanted to see the place where he had been killed...hence the visit to Verulamium, because that was where the martyrdom of Alban had happened. When? Somewhere between 250 and 300 AD.

Germanus went to the tomb, ordered it to be opened, and placed in it relics of some of the apostles and martyrs that he had in a box that he wore around his neck. Then he scooped up some soil of a reddish colour and placed that in his box, believing it to have been stained by the blood of the martyred Alban. He was a happy bishop. I'll come back to Germanus in a minute, but before I do so, let me explain the story of Alban and his martyrdom.

Alban was a citizen of Verulamium, a pagan, but one day he heard a knock on his door. When he opened the door, the man standing there explained that he was a Christian priest fleeing from persecution. Please could Alban help. Alban invited him in and inspired by the priest over the next few days, asked to be taught Christianity.

A few days later, there was a noise of soldiers outside the door. Alban said to the priest, 'Lend me your cloak and I will pretend to be you.' The man did so, and Alban told him to make his escape quickly out of the back door.

The knocking on the front door became noisier. The soldiers shouted that they had orders to come in and search the house for a fugitive wearing a cloak. Alban, dressed in the cloak was arrested, taken into custody, tortured, and brought to trial. He was accused of being a Christian.

In front of the Judge who ordered him to offer worship to the Emperor, Alban replied: 'My name is Alban and I worship and adore the true and living God'. Whereupon, he was led out of Verulamium, by a troop of soldiers. They crossed the River Ver, and he was taken up the hill where he was beheaded and buried...

Now there's lots more colour in this story but I have stripped it down to its essentials. So, on that hillside, where loads of wildflowers grew, in a pagan cemetery, he was buried... but as his fame grew more and more people came to visit his grave until eventually a small shrine was built over it. Of course, archaeologists have since spent much effort in speculating what happened to that original shrine, but it is assumed that it is probably somewhere under the floor of the Norman abbey... but they have found an extensive Roman cemetery.

But now, back to Germanus. He took the relics of Alban home to Auxerre and in a church built especially to honour Alban, he created a shrine, and around it placed placards explaining who Alban was. Not long afterwards, Germanus left Auxerre and travelled with his box of relics to Ravenna. In that box were some bones of Alban. In Ravenna, Germanus died. What to do with his box of relics? Answer, give them to the Pope...and there in Rome they remained until the 10th century when the relics were given to a young Byzantine Princess called Theophanu who was married to the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto II. She took the relics across the Alps to Germany and was saved from danger, she believed, by Alban...so, when she arrived in Cologne, she gave the relics for safe keeping to one of the great churches, St Pantaleon. And there they remain still...

...except that in 2002 we had a phone call from the Catholic priest of St Pantaleon. He explained that he had the relics of Alban but would like some of them to come home. So, Jan and the Dean went to Cologne and were given by the Bishop of Cologne a silver casket containing a shoulder bone taken from the shrine of Alban in St Pantaleon. The relics were brought back to St Albans and in a wonderful ceremony were deposited in the shrine of Alban behind the High Altar.

Two things to say...firstly, the Bishop of Cologne said to Jan and the others, 'Alban now carries the Catholic Church on one shoulder and the Anglican Church on the other.'

And, secondly, the priest from St Pantaleon stood at the shrine of Alban for the ceremony in St Albans Abbey: his father had been a U boat Commander in World War II and the Dean's father, had been a Naval Captain, and later an Admiral. And there we were, a wonderful act of generosity and reconciliation between two nations, and two great Christian churches.

Do I believe that those relics really are the bones of Alban? Frankly, I do not know...and I don't much care. It was the symbolism of reconciliation and profound friendship which mattered...a sign that people who die for the faith can have influence on future generations in ways that would amaze them...

You too are God's saints...people baptised, people who are weekly at the Eucharist, people who care graciously for others; you, just by being you, are witnesses to the faith, that is what the word 'martyr' means...and none of us can know whether our faith has brought others to Christ. All we can do is to remain faithful to our Lord, offering ourselves daily to him, and leaving the future in his wounded and loving hands...

The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert.