

St Alfege

Yesterday the Church of England commemorated the late tenth and early eleventh century St Alfege (or Alphege). After a time as a monk and as a hermit Alfege became Abbot of Bath and then Bishop of Winchester. In 1005 he was made Archbishop of Canterbury. His austere life and his generous almsgiving made him a revered and much-loved leader of the Church.

However, in 1011 the Danes overran the south-east of England and took Alfege prisoner. A huge ransom was demanded but Alfege refused to pay it and forbade anyone else paying it on his behalf. He knew that to pay such a large sum would impoverish those in his care even more they already were. As a result of that refusal he was brutally murdered in 1012.

A church of St Alfege was built on the site of his martyrdom in Greenwich and in front of the altar is his memorial inscribed with the words: "He who dies for justice, dies for Christ".

The original church no longer exists. It was rebuilt in the 13th century and again in 1718 to a design by Nicholas Hawksmoor. Like St Martin's it suffered damage in the Second World War but was restored and rededicated in 1953. The church is a partner in the Community of the Cross of Nails and indeed was prayed for as part of the prayer cycle this last Wednesday.

So why do we continue to remember and celebrate people like Alfege who lived such a long time ago? Should we not be looking to the present and the future instead of to the past? The simple answer is that history can help us to create a better world if we are willing to learn from what happened in the past. Alfege's steadfast and courageous commitment to his Christian faith and to the poor in his charge is as relevant an example to us today as it was centuries ago.

Yet sadly so often we do not learn from history. Kidnappings, ransom demands, brutal killings are still a painful reality of our world today. Christians and others are still persecuted, and in some cases killed, for their faith, their beliefs, their defence of human rights, their political views. There is much that is bad in our modern world that Alfege would recognise.

The situation in places such as Syria is dreadful and seems to get worse with no obvious end in sight. Many of us surely feel quite helpless and frustrated. Yet people like Alfege had a vision of a better way, and as Christians we are called to share that same vision too. That is the way of the God of love, of his risen Son and of his life-giving Holy Spirit. Let us follow Alfege in being encouraged and led onward by our faith in God.

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