

HOME RETREAT SATURDAY 29 JANUARY 2022

ON ST ALBAN ROE: A REFLECTION ON HIS LIFE AND MARTYRDOM

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you. Lord our God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Good morning and welcome to this home retreat.

St Alban Roe is one of 17 Benedictines who were martyred in the period of the Reformation. He is Ampleforth's, or more accurately the community of St Laurence's, one canonized saint and his feast day is this coming Monday. Hence his life and death seem an opportune meditation for this retreat talk.

I think many of you will know of him, but not necessarily all. I remember that one bishop here in the 1990s for an ordination, hearing his name in the Litany of Saints, asked afterwards 'Who was he?'

Inevitably I have to go some way to answer this question, but it will need to be brief, otherwise I will turn this into a history lesson. My stated intention rather is to draw themes from his story to inspire our Christian lives and our prayer.

Alban Roe was a monk, who did his monastic training at St Laurence's Dieulouard in Lorraine from 1613 to 1615, from where he was sent to help found the new community of St Edmund's in Paris. He then spent many years on the English mission. He was sent as so common at that time to England, it being thought that as Pope St Gregory the Great first converted the English to the Gospel through the ministry of the monk St Augustine of Canterbury and his monastic companions, so it would be again in the 17th century: monks would make the best of missionaries.

Spy networks were good enough, however, to ensure that Alban was quickly arrested, and there then followed various imprisonments, with also a period of deportation. Sometimes the imprisonments were very harsh: for example at Maiden Lane and in St Alban's. But in a long period of some 15 years in the Fleet prison in London, there was a more relaxed regime, which indeed at times allowed him to go out during the day on pastoral missions. This was the heart of his apostolic work. He was finally executed in 1642 during the English revolution when again there was a sharp turn of the tide against Catholics.

This is the story briefly told, but I would now like to look at a couple of points a little more deeply. The first of these is that Alban was a bit of a character and this

character is a reminder of the point, important for all of us, that we are all born *to be* saints, but we are not *born* saints. It is usually quite a journey to become a saint.

A favourite theme in the life of Alban Roe, is that he was argumentative and something of a troublemaker, particularly in his youth. This is perhaps already evident in the story of his conversion to Catholicism, which began when he visited a Recusant prisoner in St Alban's to convince him of his folly, but found his own certainty instead undermined.

Following his conversion, he made his way to the English College at Douai in Northern Europe in 1607 where he took a leading role in the fomenting of unrest and was expelled. He encouraged students to resist penances and there was a row about the placing of a cupboard, which superiors took away and Roe replaced. As so often it is such little things that cause trouble and tempers to explode. He sought testimonials after his dismissal, which were refused by superiors, but secured significantly from fellow students.

One historian comments thus: 'It is only too plain that his "sharp and ready wit and tongue well hung", his rash fearlessness and his evident popularity with his fellow-students, had led him into grave indiscretion, and more than indiscretion, and that there is as yet apparent in his conduct little or none of the Benedictine spirit of obedience and humility. This developed in him later'. So the historian and indeed a monk historian. It is certainly true that after the Douai debacle, he went to Dieulouard, where peacefully so far as we are aware, he was professed and ordained. No moving of cupboards reported.

Yet as is often the case, it is a bit too simplistic and unrealistic to say that he simply exchanged one type of temperament for another, journeying from rebellious student to obedient monk. Rather it is that God takes aspects of our characters and he moulds both the good and the bad aspects into his purposes, indeed if the bad can be properly channelled then maybe this becomes the key to these purposes. We will see this in just a moment.

But first another aspect of his character: he was also very sociable and enjoyed human company. Something of his character is evident in his *modus operandi*, which had less of St John the Baptist in the desert and more of Our Lord, a wine-drinker and the friend of tax collectors and sinners. He seemed to be known for his good humour, and indeed for his jokiness. There is the suggestion of drinking and card games; indeed cards are one of his emblems. This behaviour was condemned by some fellow Catholics, who included his name, among others, on a

list of ‘scandalosi’. But the counter argument goes that they were moved by opposition to religious orders on the mission and jealous of pastoral ploys that worked. It can be so, though perhaps we do see here again Alban ‘the character’.

He carried a jaunty good humour and ready wit into his trial and execution. Indeed the verbal sparring of his youth was again deployed to wrong foot the sheriff, who agreed, when asked, that he could be pardoned if he renounced the faith, which led Alban to riposte in triumph that it was thus shown that his ‘treason’ consisted simply in his profession of the Catholic faith, the traditional religion of England and not the political sedition for which he was ostensibly arraigned on the capital charge.

There is a bit of a bloodthirsty bit coming up as is inevitable in a consideration of Reformation martyrs.

Although Alban and his companions were hanged till they were fully dead and were only then disembowelled and quartered, still the grisly and macabre ritual was followed according to the sentence. Alban had provided in advance a commentary, which is a sort of epitaph on his priestly and pastoral ministry: ‘After blessing the Catholics present [on the morning of the execution] Fr Alban said to them: “When you see our arms stretched out and nailed to the city gates, imagine that we are giving you the same blessing as now; and when you see our heads high up on London Bridge, take it that they are there simply to preach to you, to proclaim that very faith for which we are about to die”.’

I think there is a point here which is at the heart of the understanding of Christian martyrdom, namely that what can seem like a terrible disaster, such as the display of severed heads and limbs, can nevertheless in the economy of the crucified and risen Christ, be the source of blessing and of grace.

So I would like to leave you with these thoughts, that we are born to be saints, not born saints. That we have to work with the temperaments we are given, and of course with the temperaments others are given. Although we cannot, God can transmute the base metal of our temperaments into the gold of his loving design and purpose for us. Like St Alban and all the martyrs we should hold to the faith, believing and trusting that at the end it will hold us. And lastly we should look below the surface, God can work with the grimmest of circumstances and turn them into a blessing.

I would like to end with the prayer for the feast of St Alban and his companions:

All powerful, ever-living God, turn our weakness into strength. As you gave your martyrs Alban Roe and companions the courage to suffer death for Christ, give us the courage to live in faithful witness to you. Through Christ our Lord Amen.