

Solemn Evensong for Albantide: Sunday 20th June 2010, 6.30pm

“Do not be ashamed to be yourself, fight to the death for truth” +

Words from our first reading this evening, from the book of Ecclesiasticus: Be yourself, and fight for truth. That’s quite a heroic calling isn’t it? But very current, because in our present age being ashamed of the truth is commonplace, fighting for it relatively rare, indeed something heroic.

The 18th Century German theologian, Friedrich Schliermacher, says this:

Heroes of religion, holy souls, as they have been seen, who are entirely permeated by religion which is all in all to them, are wanting and must be wanting to this generation

If that were true then, it’s more true now. Putting religion aside for a second, our society hungers for a hero; we’re fed up, disaffected, frustrated, even just plain bored of the humdrum and the everyday. So society seeks its heroes elsewhere.

Pop Idol, X factor, Big Brother. The World cup (fat chance there!) Doctor Who (I’m treading on thin Ice here with the rector I can tell!)

But in comparison to everyday life, in the world of celebrity, or fiction, we’ve got a whole bunch of heroes to choose from. I confess myself to having consumed an entire season of the American series heroes in a single evening, and emerging the following day stupefied. In the world that is not ours, life is filled with hero figures. And without turning into Bonnie Tyler, we could say that we do, indeed, need a hero.

Today we celebrate a hero of a different sort. Different from the world that is not ours, a Christian Hero, one of our own: St Alban. A Christian hero. It’s funny how that word, Christian, tends to neutralise the excitement in

people's imagination, seems to coat it in tweed, with the feint smell of Radio 4; roller-coasters are exciting things, but can you imagine what a *Christian* roller-coaster would look like? For some reason it seems less spectacular, and probablyflat.

But St Alban was anything but that; St Alban was a hero, a Christian superhero, and his martyrdom is filled with bravery, truth, and courage.

The story goes that the Pagan Alban received a Christian Priest into his own home, and was so impressed by the Good News of Jesus Christ, that he was converted, and Baptised. Then came a fateful knock at the door. Under the Roman persecution, the priest was to be arrested, but thinking on his feet, Alban swapped cloaks with the priest, and went to be tried in his place. The magistrate was enraged at the deception, and Alban was ordered to be killed. Beheaded, in fact, and offered up to the Roman Gods.

His only crime was not to be ashamed of himself, and fight for the truth he had just received. To say to the magistrate: "I worship and adore the true and living God who created all things." To fight for that even to his death.

Some hero, we might think. I'm sure the Romans did. He's hardly superman; he died. As disappointing ending to the film, an anticlimax.

Perhaps I might try and change your mind and restore St Alban as our national superhero:

It takes superhuman strength: to stand firm to your beliefs, even to death. Not just to keep the faith, but to resist fighting, resist the urge to retaliate, to be strong enough to endure the injustice before him and then to die for what he believed.

It takes superhuman courage: to have the resolve, the determination and the will, to say: "Yes, this is what I believe, I am a Christian and if you don't like that, I accept the consequences." It takes great courage not to be ashamed.

It takes superhuman sight: far beyond x-ray vision or mutant laser beams, Alban could see the end, the future, the purpose and the goal of his faith.

Alban could see his place with Christ in Heaven and knew where he was headed. He also saw in the priest he sheltered the future of that man's ministry, the need for him to keep on sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, and to bring others to become part of that body.

Above all these things, it takes Goodness, superhuman Goodness, to be able to do all these things. You must be overflowing with goodness, the goodness that comes from God by Grace, to show that unswerving devotion to that which is just, true and right; But not to fight for it, to die for it. Offering himself, and uniting his life with the risen Jesus he had only recently encountered.

The mark of a true superhero, is true goodness in all things. Goodness that for us comes from God's Grace.

St Alban is by far not the biggest of heroes, for of course the biggest and best of superheroes, for all times, all places, when there's no one else to call, is of course Our Lord Jesus Christ. The man who saved the entire world, from sin and death, and who is master of time and space and who, as the very Word of God, created the entire Universe. The Word God Spoke, made flesh, who came to perform miracles, raise the dead, heal the sick, and save the entire planet, indeed to save humanity from itself.

So much for the world that's not ours: the telly and heat magazine, because we've got a much better hero than them all. Not just A hero, OUR hero, THE hero. The hero to end all heroes.

Where does that leave us normal ordinary people then? Well, we share, like Alban, a part of that Divine Heroism. There's just a little bit of it in all of us. We were made part of the body of Christ in baptism, just as Alban was, so we share in the heroism of Jesus, as off cuts from the One True Hero – chips off the old block. Batman has Robin, and Professor Xavier has his X-men, but Jesus Christ, has Us; and he wants us to work on that little spark of Divine heroism inside us. Some of us have worked on it so there's actually quite a lot of it; you never know it might be the person sat next to you, even scarier it could be you. To be ourselves truly, not to be ashamed of who and what we

are, to be the everyday heroes of the Christian faith, is what we were born for, and we do the heroic work of Him who made us, in the here and now.

So let's get down to work, put on our superhero gear and get fighting for the truth. Every superhero needs a creed, a way of life, a code by which to live, and tonight in our first reading from the book of Ecclesiasticus we have a pretty decent summary:

1. do not be ashamed to be yourself
2. Do not worry about harm, or your downfall
3. Never speak against the truth
4. In fact, fight to the death for truth,
5. Do these things and the Lord God will fight for you.

That constant goal, to stand for the truth that Jesus Christ died for us. That Jesus Christ is still with us, through His Holy Spirit, and with us at every Holy Communion. The eternal truth that is the Love of God, made manifest in Jesus Christ. The self-same Truth shown to our first martyr in this country, Alban, and shown to us, day by day, Mass by Mass, in the sacrifice of our hero Christ, on the cross.

But these spiritual heroics don't just happen in these stone walls, they happen outside in the place of worship the other side of that big wooden door, know to most as 'the world'. If you meet someone who doesn't know, or even worse doesn't like Jesus Christ, stand up for what you believe. Speak about the Good he has done in your life, speak about the good things He wants you to do. To help bring His Kingdom into reality in the here and now, so that the whole world may experience His Kingdom to come. Fight bravely for truth, for justice and Love, and never be ashamed.

I know it's a Bowie song, you, me, this parish, this diocese, this Christian church, this country, the whole world: "we could be heroes" but not just for a day, but for our whole lives. We could stand shoulder to shoulder with St Alban, looking ever forwards to Christ, and to our place with him in eternal bliss in Heaven. +