



Green Pilgrimage Network

St Albans, Church of England: theological statement on green pilgrimage

Inspired by Alban, Britain's first Christian martyr, sustained by our tradition of hospitality, worship, and learning, and renowned as a place of pilgrimage, the cathedral is a community of welcome and witness.

St Alban

Alban lived in the Roman town of Verulamium, about the end of the third century. During a time of persecution, he welcomed and sheltered a Christian priest who was on the run. Alban was so impressed by his guest that he was converted to Christianity. When soldiers came to Alban's home in search of the priest, Alban exchanged clothes with him allowing him to escape. Alban was arrested in his place. Standing trial, Alban was asked to make offering to the Roman gods, but Alban refused, declaring his faith in "the living and true God who created all things". This statement condemned Alban to death, and he was led out of the city, across the river and up a hillside where he was beheaded.

A tradition of sustaining and welcome Alban was buried, and Christians came to the spot to venerate the martyr saint. Around this grew a Benedictine community, replaced by a large Norman Abbey in 1077, the remains of which are still visible in the tower and parts of the cathedral. Since then, a strong tradition of pilgrimage developed and continues today, including to the annual celebration of St Alban in June.

As such, Alban is the first Christian martyr in Great Britain, and the place where Alban was buried and which became a place of worship and pilgrimage, is the oldest surviving place of Christian worship. So it is that St Albans was a major place of pilgrimage, and the town of St



Processions of pilgrims mark the annual celebration of St Alban

Albans grew up around it as a place of hospitality. In its various forms, the community of St Albans has kept alive the story of Alban and celebrated his faith. Through the communion of saints, they believe that Alban is a present reality and a sign of the Christian hope.

Sustaining this vision has not been easy. Raw materials were hard to find in this part of the world, and so the building claims to be Britain's oldest recycled building, containing bricks from the Roman town, as well as elements of Saxon and then Norman architecture. The building itself has preserved all these features and is considered to be a schoolroom to different styles and periods.

After the Reformation, the Abbey was suppressed at the King's orders and the building suffered much damage and neglect. The townspeople of St Albans purchased the Abbey and it became their parish church. In 1877 the Abbey became a cathedral as St Albans became a new diocese. Today, the cathedral probably has the largest regular congregation of all English cathedrals. It receives about 160,000 visitors a year and 16,000 school children. It is supported by about 1,000 active volunteers.

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

This confession by Alban points to the belief, which Christians share with other monotheistic faiths, in God as the creator of all that exists. Just as God created the first man and woman in his image to care for the world and share in his work of creation, so God continues to entrust to humanity the care of the Earth. This comes from the conviction that all that God made was very good, and continues to be.

The book of Genesis also shows what happens when things go wrong. It tells the ancient story that God placed the first man and woman in the garden of Eden to care for it and to live within it in a relationship of mutual inter-dependence. However, they departed from God's plan. As a result, sin, or a separation, entered the world and the man and the woman left the garden for a life of struggle in the wilderness. This separation operates at different levels: between humanity and God, between human beings themselves and between humanity and the rest of the created world.

Nevertheless, the story did not finish: God did not abandon humanity or his created world, but continued to communicate with humanity and to sustain the world of which we are part. So God called a family to be in a special relationship to communicate his blessing to all people, and God placed this people Israel in a land said to be flowing with milk and honey, which they were to sustain and nurture in relationship with God. Then, in Christ and through his death and resurrection, this covenant was opened to all peoples, healing the breach between God and humanity, and to work towards a right relationship with the created world.

The Bible ends with a picture not of a garden, but of the city of the new Jerusalem. In this city is a tree which brings healing for the nations of the world, and where water flows as a sign of blessing, mirroring the tree of life in the beginning.

This is therefore the story of a journey from the Garden of Eden to the new Jerusalem. It represents the journey that we all make towards God in our life and our experience of failure and towards redemption. However, it is not only a journey we make as individuals; rather all creation is caught up in this hope. A pilgrimage that we make to a holy place like St Albans is an acted symbol of this hopeful journey that we make with and towards God, and it is this to which St Albans has born witness from its very beginning and underlies the welcome which it extends to all people.

In St Albans, the care and development of our building and tradition through the centuries needs to be in parallel with our care for the environment and the physical resources that God has entrusted to us. Thus, our environmental strategy is part of our wider task of responsibility and care. Alongside this, the community of faith has sustained the story of Alban and celebrated and passed on his faith, which enlivens and inspires today.

At the heart of the cathedral in St Albans is the Shrine, which houses a relic, or the physical remains, of the saint. This is important, because it reminds us that the Christian hope is located in a definite place, and that it is our physical world and our physical bodies which communicate the Christian hope. In Jesus, God took upon himself a physical nature by becoming a human being, and God continues to communicate to us in physical ways, in the water of baptism and in bread and wine, his body and blood of the Eucharist. In this way the very matter of our created world becomes charged with supernatural meaning. Likewise, Jesus was raised physically from the dead, and so in the hope of eternal life, our own physical nature is not left behind, but taken up and transformed. The matter of this world is not left behind in the Christian hope, and in caring for the world, we are not only preserving something for the past, we are also anticipating a glorious future – the reconciliation of every one and every thing in God.

St Albans, October 2011