

ALBAN OF VERULAMIUM

Hundreds and hundreds of years ago – nearly two thousand years ago in fact - the Romans ruled Britain. They had done impressive things here, particularly in the building of fine roads and cities. One of the cities they built was Verulamium. It stood in what is now the southern part of St Albans, where today there is a park and a lake, a museum and a few ruined walls.

Among the many people who lived in this city was a man called Alban. He was a wealthy man and well-known in the town, and had been given the honour of being made a Roman citizen.

One day Alban was in his villa when he heard a frantic knocking on his door. On opening it he found a Christian priest who was desperately looking for a hiding place. Diocletian, the Roman Emperor, had recently issued a savage edict announcing that all Christians should be rounded up and killed. Anyone found with the Cross on their person or talking about Jesus or breaking bread with others would instantly be arrested under Roman law. The priest was running for his life. The name of the priest is not known, but he has come to be known as Amphibalus, because that is the name of the type of cloak he wore.

Alban was not a Christian at this point in the story: he would have worshipped the gods and goddesses of the Roman religion – deities such as Jupiter and Juno, Mars, Mercury and Venus. He felt sorry for the Christian priest, however, and invited him into his house. During the days that followed, with the priest in hiding, the two men talked and Alban came to know about Jesus and about the Christian faith. He was also able to watch the priest praying continuously. Impressed and fascinated, he asked more and more questions until at last he felt ready to accept Jesus as his Lord too and to be baptised by his new friend.

Meanwhile, the Roman authorities had discovered where the priest was hiding. Soldiers started banging at the door. At this, Alban suggested that he and the priest should swap cloaks. The priest would then be able to escape, disguised as a Roman. Alban felt it was very important that the priest should be able to continue telling others the good news about Jesus. And so the priest escaped, and Alban was arrested in his place and taken before the judge.



The judge was furious that Alban had protected the priest. He said that Alban would only be freed if he worshipped the Roman gods there and then in the court-room. Alban refused. The judge demanded to know who this prisoner was. “My parents named me Alban”, the prisoner replied, “and I worship and adore the true and living God who created all things”. At this the magistrate ordered that Alban should be flogged and tortured; when Alban still refused to worship the Roman gods, the judge ordered Alban's execution.

The place where executions were carried out was on a hilltop just outside the city walls. Alban was taken through the city streets, out of the gates and across the River Ver. So many people had heard about this execution and were thronging the streets to see Alban walk to his death. The crowd made crossing the river by the bridge difficult. Alban lifted his eyes to heaven and the river ran dry. When the executioner saw this he threw down his sword and refused to kill Alban. He begged to die either in his place or with him. Another executioner had to be chosen.



Alban then began to climb the hill – a gently rising slope covered with many kinds of flowers. When he reached the top Alban asked God to give him water and a spring bubbled at his feet. There Alban met his death. The man who executed him was punished – as Alban’s head fell off, the executioner’s eyes dropped out onto the ground. The soldier who had refused to kill him was also executed at the same time.

The judge was so astonished by the miracles that had taken place that he called a halt to the persecution of the Christians and began to honour the death of the saint. In time a magnificent cathedral dedicated to the saint was built on top of the hill. Alban’s martyrdom is remembered every year on 22 June. His symbols are a rose, from the flowers that grew on the hillside, and a special cross, which is meant to be like the one Amphibalus used.