

A sermon preached by the Revd. Nigel Guthrie at St Swithun, Shobrooke on Sunday 22 April 2012 commemorating the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the martyrdom of St Alphege.

Last Thursday a notable anniversary came and went with virtually no public recognition. 19<sup>th</sup> April 2012 was the one thousandth anniversary of the death of one of this country's greatest Christian leaders. Sadly he is almost unheard of. Alphege came from the west of England, born near Bath in the mid tenth century, perhaps soon after 950. He became a monk at Deerhurst near Gloucester and later on retired even further from ordinary life to become a hermit in Somerset. It was Dunstan, then Archbishop of Canterbury who brought him from obscurity and appointed him Abbot of Bath. Then in 984 he became Bishop of Winchester where he became known for his austere life and generous charitable help. Finally in 1005, he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury.

So this West Country Christian, who lived much of his life in obscurity, rose to become leader of the English Church. We know little enough about his life but the events which happened while he was bishop and Archbishop tell us much about his faith and character. He lived at a time of great trouble for the English who were subject to attacks by the Danish invaders. In 994 the king Ethelred the Unready sent Alphege to negotiate with two of the Danish leaders, Anlaf and Swein, who had conducted raids in London and the West Country. The result was that the Anglo Saxons had to pay tribute money to the Danes but in the process Anlaf became a Christian and promised never again to come to England with warlike intent – a promise which he kept. There is no doubt that Alphege's Christian faith must have deeply impressed the Danish warrior.

But Ethelred was unable to prevent further Danish raids and demands for money and by 1011, when Alphege has been Archbishop for about six years the Danes overran much of southern England and even when the Danegeld, or tribute money was paid they continued to attack and steal from the English. Eventually the raiders took Canterbury and captured Alphege and other dignitaries demanding a ransom for them. Eventually the others were released but Alphege, for whom the enormous sum of £3000 was demanded refused that it should be raised and further impoverish the people. He was kept imprisoned for seven months until one day there Danes were holding a feast and after they had got drunk started to attack the Archbishop with the bones of oxen, with an axeman delivering the final blow, perhaps to put Alphege out of his misery. He was killed at Greenwich and buried at first in Old St Paul's Cathedral, being regarded as a national hero by his fellow countrymen. After Cnut became king in 1016 there was a reconciliation between the Danish and the Anglo Saxons and as part of that Alphege's body was moved to Canterbury Cathedral. He was soon declared to be a martyr for the faith and

particularly witnessing to the importance of justice. He was mentioned in the last sermon given by Thomas a Becket before his own martyrdom.

From the earliest centuries of the Christian Church those who laid down their lives for their faith inspired others to be stronger in their own faith and to follow the example of Jesus, not necessarily giving up their lives, but by living lives which gave service to others, to the poor or to the community, or perhaps by living more simply and giving money to charity. Alphege is one of the great English followers in that tradition and I believe it is good to remember him, not least during Eastertide. Like all the Christian martyrs he knew that this life, valuable and wonderful though it was, was only a preparation for an even better life to come. So although he no doubt faced fear, pain and distress during his imprisonment he did not hold back from suffering for the sake of those he was called by God to serve. It is a noble story, perhaps an unfashionable one, but one which I believe it is very good to remember one thousand years on.