

Friday 19 April 2024

St Alphege



Manuscript of the life of Alphege made at Canterbury shortly after his death (BL Arundel 16, f. 2)

Alphege became a monk at Deerhurst near Gloucester. In later life he withdrew to become a hermit in Somerset. In 984, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dunstan, drew him back to become Abbot of Bath and Bishop of Winchester. In 1005 he became Archbishop of Canterbury, where his austere life and lavish almsgiving made him a revered and much-loved man.

In the year 1011, the Danes overran south-east England, taking Alphege prisoner. They put the then enormous ransom of £3,000 on his head, but Alphege refused to pay it and forbade anyone from doing so, knowing that it would impoverish the ordinary people even more.

He was brutally murdered by his captors at Greenwich on this day in the year 1012.

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Bible readings © the publishers of the NRSV translation.

Prayers of intercession © Transcript of medieval prayer to Alphege from [A Clerk of Oxford](#).

The liturgy assumes the service is Eucharistic. The prayers of consecration are included at the end.

The hymn can be accessed via a YouTube link. Please click on the links.

To see service transcripts from previous weeks, please visit the page, <http://www.medlockhead.co.uk/resources/index.htm>

Introduction and welcome

HYMN 1 For all the saints

(please click on this link to hear the hymn)

The Welcome

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

All Amen.

The Lord be with you

All And also with you.

The Preparation

**All Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Our Lord Jesus Christ said:

The first commandment is this:

‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, with all your mind,
and with all your strength.’

And the second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’

There is no other commandment greater than these.

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

All Amen. Lord, have mercy.

Christ calls us to share the heavenly banquet of his love with all the saints in earth and heaven. Therefore, knowing our unworthiness and sin, let us confess our sins in penitence and faith, firmly resolved to keep God’s commandments and to live in love and peace with all.

All Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we have sinned against you
and against our neighbour
in thought and word and deed,
through negligence, through weakness,
through our own deliberate fault.
We are truly sorry
and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
who died for us,
forgive us all that is past
and grant that we may serve you in newness of life
to the glory of your name.
Amen.

Almighty God,
who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon you,
pardon and deliver you from all your sins,
confirm and strengthen you in all goodness,
and keep you in life eternal;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All Amen.

The Gloria

All Glory to God in the highest,
and peace to his people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King,
almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks,
we praise you for your glory.
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world:
have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father:
receive our prayer.

**For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.**

The Collect for St Alphege

Merciful God,
who raised up your servant Alphege
to be a pastor of your people
and gave him grace to suffer for justice and true religion:
grant that we who celebrate his martyrdom
may know the power of the risen Christ in our hearts
and share his peace in lives offered to your service;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
All Amen.

First reading

A reading from the book of the Prophet Isaiah

Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, 'Give them up,' and to the south, 'Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.' *Isaiah 43:1-7*

This is the Word of the Lord

All Thanks be to God.

Second reading

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. *Hebrews 5:1-4*

This is the Word of the Lord

All Thanks be to God.

HYMN 2 Agnus Dei (Alleluia)

[\(click on this link to hear the hymn\)](#)

Gospel reading

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew

All Glory to you O Lord.

Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?' *Matthew 16:24-26*

This is the Gospel of the Lord

All Praise to you O Christ.

Sermon

Having never heard of Alphege I had to do some research and what I found was that, predictably, this ancient character is so much more relatable than I ever imagined.

Alphege was a 'child prodigy' of priesthood, going into monkhood at an early age, even for those times. He lived a frugal, quiet life and was promoted several times until, ultimately, he became Archbishop of Canterbury. So far, so predictable for a Saint. Alphege even died a martyr which sealed his sainthood forever. He was known to be very wise; he was sent on several peace treaties and even converted hardened Vikings to his beloved Christian faith, such were his powers of reasoning and contrition!

The thing that I love about Alphege though, is that he isn't a saint because he contested for the Christian faith (although he did that too obviously) but because he lived out the Christian virtue of justice. Such was his reputation among the Vikings that, when captured by them, they demanded an eye-watering ransom for his release of £3,000. Alphege knew that raising this money was likely to cost his people more than just coins, it would ruin them and so he refused to be ransomed and, as a consequence, faced a gruesome death by 'stoning' with animal bones.

How many of us, when faced with an horrific death, would do what we could to try to get out of it? It's human nature, and yet what Alphege did was try everything that he could *not* to get out of it. I am sure that he didn't necessarily want to die, but neither could he live with the fact that probably, what little his people had, would have been used to pay the ransom and they would have faced even worse hardship. The situation was, in a word, unjust.

I read somewhere that in the Jewish faith Jews cry out for social justice – justice for a nation against an enemy or individual who has been abused in some way. Whereas when a Christian thinks about justice they put him or herself in the dock and ask for forgiveness (and that Justice be done). Now I am not sure if I agree with this entirely, but I do know that Justice plays a large part in our lives whether we notice it or not and, unfortunately, at the moment, the war in the Ukraine has focused the world's eye on the need for justice.

For most of us though, Justice is a daily quest. How many times have you heard a child cry 'But it's not fair!'—usually accompanied by tears and a stamp of the feet? How many times do you hear people on the bus moan about tax increases or even the weather—as if we naturally deserve better out of both the government and the planet? How would you feel if someone beat you to a car parking space that you are about to drive into? Justice often induces anger and anger can rapidly spread and go beyond that of one person, to anger on behalf of others until, eventually, a whole nation can take offence and then the trouble really begins.

And yet, as humans, nothing we have is ours. It is all God given. The trouble is, we forget that. And that doesn't make injustice OK. When someone has been abused, when they have been hurt physically, emotionally or even financially, there is a pain that 'needs' justice. God knows this but we rarely leave room for God's judgement because that is often not swift enough for us, or even, not enough for us. We forget that we ask for forgiveness for our sins, but quite like to see other people pay for theirs.

Hebrews 10:30 states 'For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people".'

Alphege knew that his people would have to pay for the sins of the Vikings. His people would be expected to pay for his ransom and would do so if only he would let him. Alphege had a big heart for justice and didn't value his life as worth the suffering of many others and he was willing to pay with it if it would only save his beloved people from starving that year.

And so justice is a relative thing. It depends upon your viewpoint but there seems to be a baseline of what humans feel is just and what is not. But what does God call us to? Is it not righteousness—to live justly lives, making sure that we neither harm nor offend others whether or not they harm or offend us?

Micah 6:8 says, 'He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God'.

This is not the most palatable message for most of us to hear when we are angry, but the Bible makes it very clear that sin is sin regardless of the offence and so if we truly want justice, then we have to leave it to the true judge.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:38–39 'You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also'.

One of the hardest lessons of the Bible I think. However, this of course begs the question, why have a police force? If as Christians we believe that God will be the final judge, why do we feel the need to appoint people to dole out punishment? The answer of course is that, without the police, chaos would ensue. Most of us would abide by the 'rules' but not all and it's the minority that cause the problem.

The Bible tells us that this all stems from that Original Sin in the garden of Eden. God's beautiful creation was in perfect harmony until Adam and Eve upset the apple cart.

Having worked with offenders for a few years, I can tell you that the notion of justice is very subjective. Often, I heard accounts of how a crime was committed 'because' ... that 'because' being another person, or a specific situation that was seen to be unjust. Even shoplifting brought forth cries of 'the government doesn't pay me enough...it's not fair'.

Justice is such a precious commodity. It rules our lives in ways we overlook every single day but the message is clear...

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath,
for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.

Romans 12:19

and

The Lord longs to be gracious to you;
therefore he will rise up to show you compassion.

For the Lord is a God of justice.
Blessed are all who wait for him!

Isaiah 30:18

I do not have an answer for the many questions that remain concerning justice, especially when we witness daily the invasion of one innocent country by another much more powerful country. What are we supposed to do? President Zelensky himself recently told the invading Russian Army that ‘God will not forgive’—a contentious statement that I suggest *might* mean that God will not *forget*.

As Christians today, the one thing that we can do is the one thing that people of faith have done for millennia, we can cry out to God and be sure that He will hear our voices. That is what Alphege would have done and in a way, perhaps Alphege did serve the Vikings their justice—after all they got nothing for their sins; they went to all the trouble of capturing and then ransoming him for nothing.

Whatever we do, today and tomorrow and every day after that, perhaps the very best thing we can do is to be aware of our own actions and alive to the fact that we need to avoid unjust or careless acts that cause harm and create anger.

The Creed

Do you believe and trust in God the Father,
the source of all being and life,
the one for whom we exist?

All We believe and trust in him.

Do you believe and trust in God the Son,
who took our human nature,
died for us and rose again?

All We believe and trust in him.

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit,
who gives life to the people of God
and makes Christ known in the world?

All We believe and trust in him.

This is the faith of the Church.

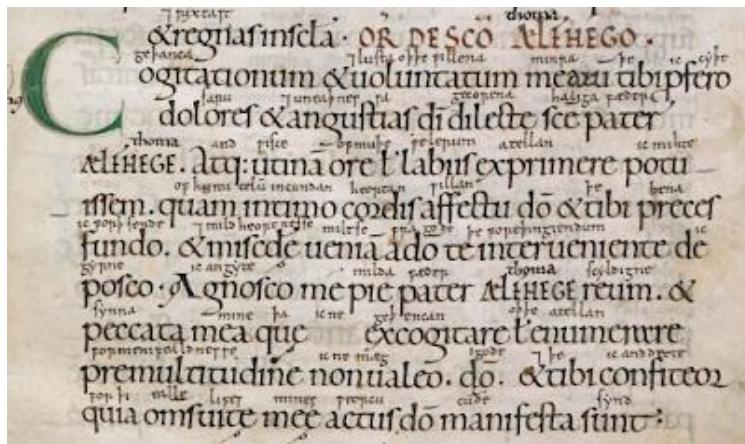
All This is our faith.

**We believe and trust in one God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

Amen.

Prayers of intercession

These prayers were written to St Alphege in the period 1012–23 AD, so very soon after his martyrdom. It's easy to adapt them so they are addressed to God himself.



The prayer,
from the manuscript
[Arundel 155 f. 182](#)

My thoughts and my desires I make known to you in sorrow and anguish, beloved of God, holy father Alphege. I wish that I could express with mouth or lips how in my inmost heart I pour out prayers to God and to you, and crave merciful pardon from God through your intercession. I know myself to be guilty, gracious father Alphege, and my sins to be more numerous than I can bring to mind or count. To God and to you I confess, therefore, all my life's deeds, which are known to God, and which I cannot conceal or amend, if not for the grace of God and, St Alphege, your interceding mercy.

Holy father Alphege, wicked is my life in the sight of God, stained is my soul with wrongful thoughts and all vices of sins, at the guilt of which my own conscience is offended. Far from me are truth and mercy, if it were not that he, the Saviour of mankind, coming down from the heavens, forbade despair and promised forgiveness to sinners. Long ago he would not suffer delays in the destruction of my weakness, that I fall not into despair. But because it is good to hope in the Lord, and blessed are all they who trust in him, with mind and with body, prostrate before God and you, with humble devotion I crave your merciful protection, holy father Alphege, that, with strength and honour greatly shining forth on earth, through your intervention in heaven you reconcile me, your servant, with God, and redeem me from all sins by your gracious intercession. O noble father Alphege, jewel of bishops and glorious beauty of Christ Church, hear sinful me humbly praying to you, and unceasingly plead for my offences to the blessed Saviour. Holy father Alphege, implore the Lord that he keep far from wretched me sinful lusts and wicked desires, and turn wrongful thoughts away from me, and deliver me from every pollution of the devil and his ministers, that I may become worthily pleasing to God, and fittingly perform this with all love for God and for you.

I pray also through you, holy father Alphege, to all the blessed host of saintly martyrs, who by their steadfast faith and shedding of their blood have achieved heavenly rewards, that supported by the protection of so many saints in this present life I may leave and shun all things which are harmful to the body and the soul, and love Christ entirely with a pure mind, and steadfastly endure in the Lord's commands. And, thus enduring, intercede for me, holy father Alphege, that Christ the Lord may grant that I may deserve to come to eternal bliss, where health, life and joy endure for all those beloved of God, through all ages of ages.

Merciful Father,

All **accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.**

The peace

Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and his name shall be called the Prince of Peace.

The peace of the Lord be always with you,

All **And also with you.**

HYMN 3 **How deep the Father's love for us
The martyr's song**

[\(click link to hear the hymn\)](#)

[\(click link to hear the hymn\)](#)

The liturgy of the Communion Service appears below:

The Dismissal

The peace of God which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord;
and the blessing of God the Almighty,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be with you now and remain with you always.

All Amen.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

**All In the name of Christ.
Amen.**

Alleluia Christ is risen!

All He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

The Liturgy of the Sacrament

Eucharistic Prayer (prayer E)

The Lord be with you

All and also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

All We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

All It is right to give thanks and praise.

It is indeed right, our duty and our joy,
always and everywhere to give you thanks,
holy Father, almighty and eternal God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And now we give thanks, most gracious God,
surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses
and glorified in the assembly of your saints.

The glorious company of apostles praise you.

The noble fellowship of prophets praise you.

The white-robed army of martyrs praise you.

We, your holy Church, acclaim you.

In communion with angels and archangels,
and with all who served you on earth and worship you now in heaven,
we raise our voice to proclaim your glory,
for ever praising you and saying:

**All Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

We praise and bless you, loving Father,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord;
and as we obey his command,
send your Holy Spirit,
that broken bread and wine outpoured
may be for us the body and blood of your dear Son.

On the night before he died he had supper with his friends
and, taking bread, he praised you.

He broke the bread, gave it to them and said:
Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you;
do this in remembrance of me.

When supper was ended he took the cup of wine.
Again he praised you, gave it to them and said:
Drink this, all of you;
this is my blood of the new covenant,
which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

So, Father, we remember all that Jesus did,
in him we plead with confidence his sacrifice made once for all upon the cross.

Bringing before you the bread of life and cup of salvation,
we proclaim his death and resurrection
until he comes in glory.

Great is the mystery of faith:

All Christ has died.
Christ is risen.
Christ will come again.

Lord of all life,
help us to work together for that day
when your kingdom comes
and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth.

Look with favour on your people,
gather us in your loving arms
and bring us with Alphege and all the saints
to feast at your table in heaven.

Through Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all honour and glory are yours, O loving Father,
for ever and ever.

All Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

**All Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

Breaking of the Bread

We break this bread to share in the body of Christ.

**All Though we are many, we are one body,
because we all share in one bread.**

**All Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world,
have mercy on us.**

**Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world,
have mercy on us.**

**Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world,
grant us peace.**

Draw near with faith.

Receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ
which he gave for you,
and his blood which he shed for you.

Eat and drink in remembrance that he died for you,
and feed on him in your hearts
by faith with thanksgiving.

All We do not presume
to come to this your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.
But you are the same Lord
whose nature is always to have mercy.
Grant us therefore, gracious Lord,
so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ
and to drink his blood,
that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body
and our souls washed through his most precious blood,
and that we may evermore dwell in him,
and he in us.
Amen.

Communion is distributed.

Prayer after Communion

God, who gave us this holy meal
in which we have celebrated the glory of the cross
and the victory of your martyr Alphege:
by our communion with Christ
in his saving death and resurrection,
give us with all your saints the courage to conquer evil
and so to share the fruit of the tree of life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All Amen

All Almighty God,
we thank you for feeding us
with the body and blood of your Son Jesus Christ.
Through him we offer you our souls and bodies
to be a living sacrifice.
Send us out in the power of your Spirit
to live and work
to your praise and glory.
Amen.