

The Alban Relic – Preached at the Sunday Eucharist, Albantide 2010, by the Dean

If you were at the Festival Pilgrimage Evensong you will have witnessed the relic of St Alban being processed and incensed. Being children of the Reformation, most British people are instinctively suspicious of the veneration of relics, and until I became Dean of St Albans I confess I was one of them.

Over the years I have spent countless holidays visiting European shrines and enjoyed myself enormously tut-tutting at relics in particular. I remember visiting St Anthony's shrine in Padua years ago. St Anthony's basilica has a huge octagonal chapel containing almost every conceivable bit of the saint. Here, suspended between two gold spikes, is the larynx with which he uttered such wonderful sermons. There, set in crystal, is his right hand, raised in perpetual blessing. There is even the tongue, still unfeasibly pink, with which he praised the Lord. There are literally scores of body parts, as if St Anthony's corpse had been exploded in the middle of the octagon and caught in the glass cases all around.

I had a lovely time chuntering for hours about the impropriety of all this, and complaining that all these relics should be given decent burial. There is of course nothing quite as satisfying as lofty disapproval of other people's customs.

Sometimes, it also has to be said, scepticism about the genuineness of relics is hard to resist. Only a few months ago I was in Rome, and went to see the head of John the Baptist at San Silvestro in Capite, just round the corner from All Saints, Fr Jonathan's church. The duty priest let me into the chapel and there indeed was the head in the middle of an altar looking very small and black. I mentioned rather naughtily that some years before I had also seen the head of John the Baptist in Amiens Cathedral in France. 'Ah yes', said the priest with a large grin. 'This can be explained. We have the head of the Baptist as a *young man*'.

As far as I have been able to discover, there are relatively few relics of St Alban, and all the ones that exist seem to be traceable back to one Church, St Pantaleon's in Cologne. How did Alban's relics get to Cologne? Apparently in two stages. Very early on, in the year 429, we know, because Bede tells us, that relics of some kind were taken from here by Germanus of Auxerre, as a present for the Pope. It is also recorded that in the tenth century these same relics of Alban were given by the then Pope to the Holy Roman Empress, Theophanu, as a wedding gift; and it was she who built St Pantaleon's Church in Cologne to house them. Later on again, at the Reformation, it is said that the rest of Alban's relics from our shrine here were smuggled out, and taken to Cologne to join the rest of him, as it were.

As I say, all the relics we know of – and that means our relic here, another in Macclesfield and another in Farnborough Abbey – have come as gifts from the one source in Cologne.

I should mention that until recently there was an alternative tradition that the whole skeleton of Alban was in Odense, Denmark. We know that the first Danish Church was founded in Odense by monks from St Albans Abbey, and the Danish tradition was that they took the skeleton of Alban with them. If you ever visit Odense you will notice that the main street is called Albaniveg and the local beer called Albanibier, because they always thought they had Alban's skeleton in their cathedral. However, a few years ago, the Dean of Odense agreed to have his skeleton carbon-dated, and it turned out to be about 1000 years too young. So that got rid of the Alban tradition in Odense - and I notice on the website they've got rid of the Dean now too.

So all the remaining relics of Alban go back to the Cologne tradition; which means that, as relics go, they are *relatively* well attested, and the shoulder bone in our shrine is *relatively* likely to be a genuine bone of St Alban. However, unlike the Dean of Odense, I am not going to let it be carbon-dated. That would clearly show a lack of faith....

'Does it really matter?' you might ask. This place carried on for 450 years with an empty shrine; what does it matter whether we have a physical relic of Alban or not?

Well, ultimately of course it doesn't matter; but I am still very glad and grateful it is there. For Christians and for human beings in general bodies matter, and location matters. In the Incarnation God became flesh and blood to save us at a particular time and at a particular place, in order to save us body and soul. In the sacraments God still comes to us in physical things, through bread, water, wine, oil, because we are physical as well as spiritual creatures. We just can't be pure spirit or pure mind. We need the tangible and the material too.

When the people we love die, a very big part of the pain is being torn away from their physical presence. By the end the body may be very old or ill or disfigured by illness, but it is still the body of person we love. Even when death comes we care about it, we want it to be treated reverently, we want a decent burial so that there can be a place, a focus of remembering. And most of us will still cling on to some material link with the person that's gone – a photograph, a ring, a lock of hair, a memento that may be meaningless to someone who doesn't know, but which may open floodgates of loving memory to the person left behind.

There is a rare video which most of you won't have seen showing the ceremony when Alban's relic was brought back by the Bishop of Cologne and put in the shrine. As the procession was passing the South Orchard a woman passer-by asked what it was all about. Someone told her and she replied 'Oh. Alban's come home then'. I don't know if she was even a Christian, but instinctively she knew that was what it meant.

When I first came here I remember George Laverick, the Clerk of Works, telling me about that day, which clearly had a big emotional impact on him. 'I don't know what it was, Dean' he said, 'but when that bone when back into that shrine it was like the battery went back into the works'.

It is a remarkable way to put it, but I know exactly what he means. Time, place, presence matter.

So I have to say I am ashamed now of all the times I've been snifty and superior about people's devotion to relics. I don't mean I have stopped being sceptical, and of course I know there has always been a load of fakery and superstition - and above all dreadfully bad taste - bound up with the whole thing. I am not naïve and I am not asking you to be. But I can see the point and the power of it now in a way I didn't before, and I wouldn't mock it now any more than I would mock someone for clinging to a relic of a dead partner. Because of course the point isn't the relic, it's the relationship: it's the love that the relic focuses - and for a Christian it's the faith that that love can't be conquered even by death.

Holy Alban, our friend and brother in Christ, be present in this place where you gave your life, and pray for us. Amen.