

TEXT: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10  
THEME: What we are worshipping we are becoming  
SUBJECT: Idolatry  
TITLE: The True and Living God

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
18 October 2020  
Messiah Moravian  
Jerry Harris

Saint Alban, the protomartyr of Britain, was a Roman citizen who lived at Verulamium (modern St Albans), a few miles northwest of London, during a time of persecution in the third century. He is the patron saint of converts and torture victims.

The chief magistrate of the city had orders to arrest all Christian clergy. One of them fled to Alban's house in order to hide from the soldiers who wished to kill him. Although Alban was not a man of faith, he was very hospitable and compassionate. The priest's faith and piety struck Alban, as well as his dedication to prayer.

Alban converted to Christianity.

Thessalonica was the most populous city of Macedonia and was known as the mother city of the entire province. The religious scene was richly diverse. Paul did not deliver an individualistic challenge to give up vice but aimed at forming a community of those who responded to his proclamation. Rather than simply organize a church, Paul founded, shaped, and nurtured a community.

Paul lived and worked in Thessalonica for about three months and then moved on as was his practice. He hears of the faith, love and hope of the Thessalonians and writes to encourage these new converts: "You became *imitators* of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit" (NRSV vs 6). The word translated "persecution" is better translated *affliction*.

"Affliction" refers to the distress and anguish of heart experienced by persons who broke with their past as they received the gospel. Conversion created external oppression and internal distress. Suffering as a result of conversion is intrinsic to Paul's understanding of the gospel, and to *imitate* him and the Lord means that one is prepared to sacrifice everything for others.

St Alban is an early exemplar of Paul's understanding of the gospel. The soldiers heard there was a priest hiding in Alban's house, so they came to search it. Alban switched clothes with the priest, enabling him to escape. Furious, the magistrate threatened Alban with death unless he returned to paganism and reveal where the priest had gone.

Alban replied, famously, "I am a Christian and I stand ready to do my Christian duty. I shall always adore and worship the true and living God." When the priest learned that Alban was arrested in his place, he turned himself in hoping to save Alban's life. For his refusal to deny his beliefs, Alban was tortured and beheaded. The priest was killed as well.

Alban's Christian duties were not just to his friends and family, not to the system of patrons and clients, not to the complicated world of honor and manipulation, that kept Roman society going. The Christian's duty is to the body of Christ—not to the body of Christ as some sort of organized phenomenon that you can sign up to, much as you might sign up to a political party or a golf club, but to a mysterious and living community whose fullness has not yet appeared.

Christian duty, Christian loyalty, is not just to people who happen to be with you now, people you happen to be involved with here, but to a future community in which all, friends and strangers, have their place. Christian loyalty and solidarity is being with and being for those you have not yet met and a world you have not yet seen.

This is why Christians ought to be passionately and sacrificially concerned about the environment, for the very simple reason that we are called to be faithful to the future, even though we can't see it, to a future of harmony and reconciliation with the whole of creation. Our failure to be loyal to this particular aspect of the future is one of the most crass and troubling forms of injustice that afflicts our world—not to mention our Church—today. (Rowan Williams, to whom this sermon is indebted).

The heaviest of Christian duties laid upon us, as upon Alban, is the demand to be in solidarity, not only with people we haven't yet met but also with the people who don't particularly want to be with us, and don't even want us to be for them. That's the heart and the energy of the Christian embrace of the world in which the Christian is placed. That's the Christian duty that constantly presses up against and challenges all the loyalties we think are obvious.

Our local loyalties are put under question when we come into solidarity with Jesus. We might remember the very tough words of Jesus about the need to go beyond the loyalties that are most immediate to us: loyalties to family and friends. Unless, says Jesus, you have loyalty that is greater than that, your limited and local loyalty will become something dangerous and corrupt, inward-looking and destructive.

The Christian duty is to stand alongside, to pray for, to give to and to be for everyone. Anything less than that and we're back in the world of privilege and power and influence, the world governed by xenophobia and suspicion, fear of the other, fear of the stranger. The driving question of such a world is: "What's in it for me?"

St Alban opened his home to the man running from persecution and decided to stand in his place and risk his penalty. Our lives must be structured around that kind of prayerful hospitality which, today, tomorrow and the day after, resolves to be open to those whom God gives us to be with and for.

St Alban is a preacher of challenging good news for us, not just in his death but also in those words with which he answered the magistrate: “I am a Christian and I stand ready to do my Christian duty. I shall always adore and worship the true and living God.”

Paul commends the Thessalonians for welcoming him, for opening their homes to him when he was a stranger. For by opening their homes to him they also opened their hearts to hear his word and they responded by turning from idols to worship and serve the living and true God.

A saying attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson describes the choice we all make, consciously or unconsciously: “A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behoves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshiping we are becoming.”

PRAYER: by Walter Brueggemann, retired Old Testament scholar and theologian.

We arrange our lives as best we can,  
to keep your holiness at bay,  
with our pieties,  
our doctrines,  
our liturgies,  
our moralities,  
our secret ideologies,

Safe, virtuous, settled.

And then you —  
you and your dreams,  
you and your visions,  
you and your purposes,  
you and your commands,  
you and our neighbors.

We find holiness not at bay,  
but probing, pervading,  
insisting, demanding.

And we yield, sometimes gladly,  
sometimes resentfully,  
sometimes late . . . or soon.

We yield because you, beyond us, are our God.  
We are your creatures met by your holiness,  
by your holiness made our true selves.  
And we yield. Amen.