

## The First English Martyr



At the time when Jesus lived on earth the Romans ruled most of the countries of Europe, the northern coastal lands of Africa and the western Asian lands bordering on the Mediterranean Sea, from Britain in the north-west to the shores of the Red Sea in the south-east.

You will remember that it was Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus; it was a Roman soldier who observed as he watched Him die and said, “Truly, this was the Son of God.”

When Jesus rose from the dead, proving His power over sin and death, many Jews believed He was the Son of God and so did many Romans.

The Romans worshipped various gods and some of their emperors insisted that the people worship them too. When Romans believed in Jesus and worshipped the one true God, they were persecuted. But this was not just because they worshipped the true God; the Roman rulers would have been quite happy to have just one more god to worship so long as their old gods were still recognized. But the Christians refused to worship the old gods or the emperor and would worship only the one true God. It was this that caused the Romans to persecute them.

The Romans ruled Britain from 55 BC when Julius Caesar landed in Kent, so when Roman soldiers and traders became Christians following the resurrection of Jesus, they brought their faith with them into all the lands where their empire took them. Thus, amongst the Roman occupiers of Britain, there were Christians in the first centuries AD.

One of these was a Christian named Amphibolus, who was being pursued by Roman soldiers. He sought shelter with a kindly Roman named Alban, who cared for him and sheltered him long enough for Alban to be impressed by his cheerful faith and the good life he lived. Alban began to ask questions about his faith in God and tried to understand what it was that gave Amphibolus such courage under persecution.

One day, he looked out across the country-side and saw, in the distance, the Roman soldiers drawing near to his house.

“They have tracked the deer to its hiding place,” said Alban, “but though the dogs have scented blood, they shall not lap it from my floor.”

Quickly he changed clothes with his guest and the fugitive fled from the house to safety. Alban gave himself up to the soldiers and was brought before the judge, who soon realized the mistake. However the judge was very angry and declared that Alban should die because he had sheltered Amphibolus, a rebel who would not worship the Roman gods.

“I’ll give you a chance to save your life,” he offered. “Make a sacrifice to the idols and I will spare your life.”

But Alban refused.

“From what family do you come?” asked the judge, hoping to find a way out of the situation.

“My parents call me Alban, and I worship the living God, the creator of all.”

“Then if you want to enjoy long life, sacrifice to the gods,” came the reply.

“No” replied Alban, “the gods you worship are worthless; they are no gods. I cannot bow down and worship them.”

The soldiers scourged him and led him out to be beheaded. The place was a hill crowned with flowers, a beautiful place. As Alban passed through the crowds that had assembled to watch, he knelt and prayed for himself and for those who were about to kill him. The man who was to execute him was so moved by that prayer that he refused to kill Alban.

“Bring in another man to execute both!” ordered the officer in charge. So both men died for their new-found faith in God.

Alban is recognized as the first Christian martyr of England. He died in AD 304.

### **Activities**

1. Write in your own words what you think Alban meant by, “They have tracked the deer to its hiding place, but they will not lap the blood from my floor.”
2. Find words in the story that mean:
  - one who is fleeing
  - chased
  - one who gives his life for a cause
  - to treat harshly because of a person’s belief
3. What was the real reason for the Roman persecution of Christians?
4. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”. What do you think this saying means?