

"For all the saints"

A series of articles about the patron saints of the nine parish churches in the Churn Valley Benefice by the Revd Arthur Champion; first published between February 2018 and December 2018 in "Parish Link" magazine

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Introduction - St Alban

During the Roman occupation of Britain, there was a man called Alban living in the city of Verulamium about 25 miles to the north of London. One day there was a knock at Alban's door from a Christian priest who was being pursued by Roman soldiers. Alban was a pagan but he took the risk of sheltering this man and to quote Bede the chronicler: "...when he observed this man's unbroken activity of prayer and vigil, he was suddenly touched by the grace of God and began to follow the priest's example of faith and devotion. Gradually, instructed by his teaching of salvation, Alban renounced the darkness of idolatry and accepted Christ."

A few days later some Roman soldiers arrived at Alban's house but by then Alban had swapped cloaks with the Christian priest to help him escape. Alban took the place of the priest by surrendering himself. The Roman judge was furious about what had happened but Alban didn't back down; instead he boldly proclaimed: "I worship and adore the living and true God, who created all things."

Alban's trial, torture and events leading up to his beheading on 22nd June are wonderfully described in Bede's book: "Ecclesiastical History of the English People". Some historians reckon that Alban was executed as early as 209AD but others claim the evidence points to around 313AD. Alban became the first recorded British Christian martyr and his grave is the oldest continuous site of Christian worship in Great Britain.

The first Norman Abbot, Paul of Caen, used Roman bricks from the ruins of Verulamium to build the present cathedral. At that time it was quite natural to dedicate a church building to one of the saints or martyrs. Pilgrims and visitors to the shrine of St Alban can light a candle and/or recite the following prayer:

*Among the roses of the martyrs brightly shines Saint Alban.
Almighty God, we thank you for this place built to your glory
and in memory of Alban, our first martyr:
Following his example in the fellowship of the saints,
may we worship and adore the true and living God,
and be faithful witnesses to the Christ,
who is alive and reigns, now and forever.
Pray for us Alban, pray for us all Saints of God
That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ
Amen*

The Alban Prayer hints quite strongly at the Anglo-Catholic practice of not only praying to God, but also asking the saints to "put in a good word" as well. Soon after the first centuries, Christians began to dedicate church buildings to other saintly men and women. Even today, the Roman Catholic Church still places some relic of a saint inside the altar and new church buildings are dedicated to a patron saint.

Before the Reformation this practice may have seemed natural enough but the first Bishop of Gloucester, Bishop John Hooper (1500 - 1555), denounced it in the strongest possible terms:

"What intolerable ill, blasphemy of God, and ethnical (heathenish) idolatry is this, to admit and teach the invocation of saints departed out of this world! It taketh from God his true honour; it maketh him a fool, that only hath ordained only Christ to be Mediator between man and him..."

The Church of England emerged from the Reformation as a kind of peace treaty between Catholics and the Puritans who in 1549 agreed to adopt the original Book of Common Prayer. Today the Church of England is a kind of miniature ecumenical movement where those of an Anglo-Catholic persuasion are able to recite the Alban Prayer, for example, whilst others can find inspiration by learning about the lives of the saints.

It's a common mistake to think that the church is the building when really the church is the gathering of baptized Christians who express the love they have received from God by sharing it with the parish and beyond.



Bagendon - The parish church of St Margaret of Antioch

Margaret gave her life during the Diocletian persecutions at the beginning of the fourth century. Her preaching before her death is said to have converted many to the Christian faith.

In the year 303 the Emperor Diocletian began a persecution of Christians throughout the Roman Empire. He perceived the Christian faith as a threat to the prevailing Roman religion and wanted to restore his version of public morality as well as reinforce his authority. Christianity was seen as morally and socially disruptive.

In the spring of 304 an edict was published which required everyone to offer pagan sacrifice or be punished by execution and the confiscation of property. Margaret was martyred at Antioch; an ancient city on the Orontes River in what is now modern day Turkey - close to the border with Syria. Nothing certain is known of her life or the manner of her death although many legends have grown up surrounding her. From a very early date the Eastern Orthodox Church honoured her as "Saint Marina the Great Martyr" and in the West from the seventh century.



About a hundred years after her martyrdom, Pope Leo the Great delivered a sermon which is associated with her in the book "*Celebrating the Saints*": "As often as we die to sin, so sin dies in us. 'Precious in the sight of the Lord' is even this 'death of his saints' for a person is slain to the world, not by destruction of their mortal frame, but by the destruction of their vices."

In the twelfth century many legends grew up about Margaret; most famously about her being swallowed by a dragon and then bursting forth from its stomach. Somewhat perversely, she is the patron saint of childbirth! Much of Margaret's life is clouded in mystery as well as incredible legends. During the Crusades a cult surrounding her legend was popular; until suppressed by papal decree. Today she serves as a reminder of the sacrifice that countless unknown Christians have made all down the centuries by standing firm in the face of severe persecution.

In the 1460s the Weavers' Guild at Cirencester had the chancel rebuilt, and it has windows with fragments of glass of that period. A leaflet available in Bagendon parish church states: "The earliest portions of the present church date from about 1100. In the North East window is a

reconstruction of two ancient figures of St Margaret and St John the Baptist whilst in the East window are fragments (which the restorers missed) of St Margaret's red robe and the head of her dragon."

Saint Margaret's patronal festival is celebrated each year on 20th July although sadly she does not appear in the book "Common Worship - Festivals". In 2013 at Bagendon the patronal festival was also a service of thanksgiving for the refurbishment of the roof over the chancel and the vestry. The generosity of the local community was recognised in the Collect: "Almighty God, we thank you for making us in your image and to share in the ordering of your world. Receive the work of many hands in this place, now restored for your worship, the building up of the living, and the remembrance of the dead, to the praise and glory of your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Finally, a prayer for St Margaret of Antioch: "Almighty God, by whose grace and power your holy martyr St Margaret of Antioch triumphed over suffering and death, strengthen us with your grace that we may endure reproach and persecution, Amen"

Baunton - The parish church of St Mary Magdalene

In the first century Mary was a very popular Jewish name:

- Mary the Mother of our Lord,
- Mary of Magdalene,
- Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

All four Gospels give Mary Magdalene a unique place of honour; almost to the same extent as Mary the Mother of our Lord. Her home was a fishing village called Magdala on the Western shore of the Sea of Galilee; just a couple of miles from Capernaum, which was the headquarters for Jesus' ministry.

Mary Magdalene is identified by some as the most infamous sinner in the Gospels; the woman whom Jesus saved from being stoned to death. The Gospels refer to several unnamed women who seem to share some of her characteristics. Mary has the reputation of being a repentant prostitute or loose woman although the New Testament does not support these claims. However, Mary's life is unique and quite wonderful:

- She was miraculously healed of seven evil spirits,
- She was a disciple of Jesus although not one of the inner core of twelve,
- She accompanied Jesus during three years of ministry,
- She remained at the foot of the Cross whilst Jesus was being crucified when all the men, apart from John, were fearfully hiding away,
- She was first to discover the empty tomb very early on Easter Sunday,
- She was the first to see Jesus after his resurrection,

- Jesus told her to share the good news with the disciples and as such she became the "Apostle to the Apostles".

There is an ancient and popular tradition that she was expelled by the Jews, took a boat journey and settled in Marseilles in the South of France.



In the medieval period a wealthy convert to the Christian faith would often build a church dedicated to Mary Magdalene. Saint Mary Magdalene's patronal festival is celebrated each year on 22nd July although sadly she does not appear in the book "Common Worship - Festivals". Mary is the patron saint of the contemplative life, converts, glove makers, hairstylists, penitent sinners, people ridiculed for their piety, perfumeries and perfumers, pharmacists, and not surprisingly of women.

In the Spring of 2018 cinemas were screening a film about Mary Magdalene which according to the publicity: "...sets out to retrace Christ's ministry from its title character's perspective, recognising her as his unsung 13th apostle in the process, while rebuffing the persistent myth, first put about by Pope Gregory in 591, that she was a repentant prostitute."

The Baunton parish church is well described by Andrew Hall, a long-standing churchwarden until moving away in 2015, in his book: Baunton: A Cotswold village history. To quote: "A tithe grant of the 12th Century mentions the chapel of St Mary Magdalene of Baudynton. It was built as a simple chapel of ease for the Augustinian monks or Black Canons of Cirencester Abbey, probably around 1150."

Baunton parish church is sometimes referred to as St Christopher's because of its fine wall painting, which depicts St Christopher ("Christ-bearer") as a giant ferryman carrying the child across a stream with fish, a ship and a small figure of a mermaid and her mirror. The wall painting is four metres high and three metres wide. An article by John Whittaker, the current churchwarden, was published in the March edition of Parish Link and describes the recent restoration project. Dr Ellie Pridgeon gave a talk about the painting on 21st April 2018.

St Christopher is well known as the patron saint of travellers; especially associated with fords and pilgrim routes. Even today an orange banner hangs in the sanctuary with the words: "St Christopher - Baunton".



The dedication of a church often give an insight into who built the church and why. Baunton parish church is an example of many parish churches that have changed their names over the years.

Coberley - The parish church of St Giles

Giles of Provence (650 to 710) was a hermit in Provence. Giles is said to have been the son of the king and queen of Athens. He was recognized for extraordinary holiness and learning but he chose to seek out a quieter way of life in France. He settled for a while in a forest at the mouth of the River Rhone before moving into another forest near the town of Nimes.

According to legend, he lived in solitude eating only herbs and the milk of wild deer. One day Flavius Wamba, King of the Visigoths, was out hunting in the forest. A deer that he was chasing ran towards Giles for protection but the king was not deterred and he shot an arrow at the deer but instead it struck Giles on the hand. Wamba was so impressed by Giles: his calm response, his life of holiness and asceticism that the king donated land for him to build a monastery. The area became known as Saint-Gilles and was an important place on the pilgrimage routes both to Compostela and to the Holy Land. Giles is reputed to have visited Rome where the Pope gave official recognition of his monastery. The Pope supposedly gave Giles two ornate wooden doors but Giles threw them into the River Tiber. However, on returning home Giles is said to have found the doors washed up on a nearby beach! However, this story may well relate to a different St Giles from two centuries earlier.



Giles cared for the wounded and those crippled by disease. The injury to his own hand never healed properly which led to him being associated with the sick and the lame as well as people who suffer from skin diseases. Lepers were banned from having contact with other people therefore churches were built for them in remote villages or on the outskirts of towns. These churches were often dedicated to Giles because of popular belief in the power of his name.

Further legendary tales grew up such as miraculous works in Greece as well as accounts of Giles challenging people in authority about their unconfessed sins. Crusaders carried the cult of St Giles throughout Europe and the Middle East. However, by the Late Middle Ages the monastery fell into ruin after relying too much on the gifts of pilgrims. Giles is the patron saint of Edinburgh. His patronal festival is celebrated each year on 1st September all around the world although sadly he does not appear in the book "Common Worship - Festivals".

The link between St Giles and Coberley parish church is surprisingly straightforward. The Berkeley family, who are famous for their castle near the River Severn, also had relatives at Coberley Court. St Giles was the patron saint of the Berkeley family so he was their natural choice when dedicating the parish church in 1331.

Coberley village is only half a mile downstream from the Seven Springs, which means the parish church of St Giles is first church on the River Thames! During the Saxon period the village was called Cuthbert's Ley; according to Diana Alexandra's booklet (1980) The Story of Coberley, Gloucestershire. It was recorded in the Domesday Book (1086) as Coberley in Respigate but over the centuries was frequently recorded as Cubberley.

Sir Giles II was born at Coberley in 1240 and he accompanied Prince Edward, later Edward I, on a crusade to the Holy Land lasting for several years. As soon as he ascended the throne in 1278 he visited Coberley; according to Eva Atherton's booklet (1994) Coberley: a history of the church and village. Sir Giles died in 1294 at Malvern and was buried before the image of St Giles in Little Malvern Priory while his heart was laid to rest in the chancel of his parish church at Coberley. His heart burial and memorial can be found on the south wall of the sanctuary, the only one in the Cotswolds. His faithful charger Lombard is buried just outside in the churchyard. This arrangement of a knight's heart and his horse is unique in any English parish church.

His son Sir Thomas rebuilt the church and added a tower and side chapel in 1331. It is interesting to note King Charles I found shelter during the Civil Wars at Coberley Court in 1643 and 1644. His son Charles II did the same in 1651. However, soon afterwards Coberley Court fell into disrepair and was demolished in 1790.

The parish church of St Giles has a fascinating history and is well worth visiting! St Giles ministered to people crippled with disease and by coincidence the National Star College is located only a mile away from Coberley. The college provides specialist further education, training, personal development and residential services for people with disabilities and acquired brain injuries.

Colesbourne - The parish church of St James

One day when Jesus was walking alongside the Sea of Galilee he came across some fishermen. Jesus called out to them and immediately James and his brother John left their nets to become his disciples (Mark 1: 16-20).

Scholars estimate that James was born about 12BC and was much older than his brother John who later became known as "the beloved disciple". Their parents were Zebedee and Salome. They were quite wealthy fishermen and they probably lived at Bethsaida. James was later called

James "the Great" to distinguish him from James "the Less" another of Jesus' disciples who was shorter or younger and whose parents were Alphaeus and Cleophas. Incidentally, Jesus also had a brother called James ("the Just") who became a leader of the Jerusalem church and in about 50AD wrote an epistle that became part of the New Testament.

Once these two brothers asked Jesus for permission to call down fire from Heaven on a Samaritan town (Luke 9: 54); of course their request was declined and from then on they were known as "the Sons of Thunder". Another time they asked Jesus if they could be promoted to sit alongside his throne in glory, which naturally annoyed all the other disciples! As a member of the inner circle, James witnessed some miraculous events:

- the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:37 and Luke 8:51),
- the Transfiguration on a mountaintop (Mark 9:2),
- Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33) and
- Several resurrection appearance (Luke 24, Matt 28, 1 Cor 15)

After the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, James spent 12 years evangelising throughout Judea followed by ten years on the Iberian Peninsula; now Spain and Portugal. On returning to Jerusalem in 44AD King Herod Agrippas had him decapitated (Acts 12: 1-2). In this way James became the first apostle to be martyred.

As often happens with the saints there is a legend surrounding how the body of James was transported back to the Iberian Peninsula... The ship being used for the journey had no sail or rudder but somehow arrived at the northwest coast of the peninsula then sailed up the River Ulla.

The Celtic Queen who ruled the area was initially hostile but after a miraculous incident she converted to Christianity and provided an ox and cart for the followers of James to transport the body. They prayed and decided to let the ox continue until it chose a place to rest. After pausing at a stream the ox finally came to rest under an oak tree at the top of a hill where centuries later the Cathedral of Santiago was built.

Another story has it that in the ninth century his body was discovered and moved to a tomb in Santiago de Compostela, which after Rome and Jerusalem has become the most popular pilgrimage site. In 1987 some 3,000 pilgrims walked the Camino de Santiago but by 2017 this had increased to 300,000 partly because of a film called "The Way" (2010) starring Martin Sheen. Some of the pilgrims are treated to a service in the cathedral during which a heavy container of burning incense is suspended from the ceiling and swings repeatedly over the heads of the masses!

James the Great is recognised as the patron saint of pilgrims and labourers. He is typically shown in stained glass and paintings with a pilgrim staff, scallop shell, sword, and pilgrim's hat, astride a white charger or with the Cross of St James. One might reasonably have expected the parish church of St James at Colesbourne to have his image in a stain glass window but



instead the north transept depicts St Peter, John the Baptist and St Paul. The parish church is situated in secluded woodland looking out across a shallow valley where sheep can often be seen grazing alongside of the River Churn.

The feast day of St James is 25th July. Perhaps in recognition of the manner of his own death one of the prayers in the CofE liturgy concludes with this prayer:

"We commend to your goodness all who have died.
We pray for those shocked and disturbed by a sudden death;
those who have died violently and without warning;
those who have died at the hands of terrorism or abusive regimes;
for the disappeared and those who have no body to bury.
Heal our grief and bring us the joy of your salvation.
Jesus, servant and King
Your Kingdom come, your will be done."

Cowley - The parish church of St Mary the Virgin, Cowley

Mary is so well known that she hardly needs any introduction! Christians down the centuries have repeated the Nicene Creed, which states: **"For us and for our salvation he (*Jesus, the Christ*) came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man."** Because of this the Gospels refer to Mary as being blessed and so the church often refers to her as the "Blessed Virgin Mary" (BVM). She alone was with Jesus from his birth some 2,000 years ago until his death about 30 years later. Mary is held in such high esteem that today over 2,300 English parish churches have been dedicated to her.

The New Testament contains very little information about her origins, family, birth or even how she met Joseph. The Bible is silent about Mary's early years but tradition has it that her parents were Joachim and Anne. Mary or Miriam (in Hebrew) was born in Jerusalem possibly close to the Pools of Bethesda. Centuries later this family home was turned into a place of worship dedicated to her mother, St Anne. Even today there is a well-preserved Crusader church on the site. It has simple architecture and a worshipful atmosphere.

At some point the family must have moved from Jerusalem to live about 80 miles away in the northern village of Nazareth in Galilee. As a young teenager Mary became engaged to Joseph a local carpenter. Just when Mary was anticipating married life, the Angel Gabriel unexpectedly announced to her in private that God had chosen her to become the mother of the promised Messiah. The Holy Spirit would conceive the baby and, after initially expressing incredulity at the announcement, Mary responded, "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done unto me according to your word" (Luke 1: 38). The church calendar traditionally celebrates the Annunciation on 25th March sometimes known as Lady Day. Mary is often described as "the second Eve" who reversed Eve's disobedience (Genesis 2:4 - 3: 24).



When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, he was concerned about her reputation in case villagers would treat her like an adulteress. However, an angel appeared and reassured him that God had conceived the baby. He married Mary and became her protector.

The Angel Gabriel also announced the surprising news that six months earlier Mary's elderly cousin, Elizabeth, had become pregnant. Mary immediately set off to visit Elizabeth and Zechariah who lived in the village of Ein Karem near Jerusalem. Mary arrived with baby Jesus in her womb and then Elizabeth's baby, who would later become John the baptiser, "leapt" inside her womb. Elizabeth spoke words of affirmation to Mary who responded joyfully with a beautiful song known as The Magnificat, which has inspired Christian worship down the centuries. The church celebrates Mary's visit to Elizabeth on 31st May each year.

The Gospel story gives rise to many questions, for example:

- How old was Mary at the time of the Annunciation?
- Did the Annunciation happen during the interval between engagement and marriage?
- How could a simple Jewish girl like Mary be so familiar with the Hebrew scriptures that inspired her song known today as The Magnificat?
- Did Jesus have any brothers or sisters?

Mary keeps appearing throughout the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles but the church has also entertained her various legends and controversial doctrines, such as:

- The dogma of her Immaculate Conception which holds that God preserved the Virgin Mary from the taint of original sin from the moment she was conceived.
- When she was only three years old her parents sent her to go and serve in the Temple where she was prepared for her unique life of purity and grace.
- Mary was with Jesus at the foot of the Cross, when he told John to look after his mother but did John really take Mary to Ephesus to live out her days?

- Roman Catholics also believe the doctrine of the Assumption, which teaches that at the end of her life Mary was taken body and soul into heaven to live with her Son forever. Every other Christian must wait until the end of time for their bodily resurrection whereas Mary's body went straight to heaven thanks to her Immaculate Conception.

To the casual observer the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church appear to venerate St Mary almost as much as Jesus, for example, by celebrating her conception on 8th December and her birth on 8th September. The feast day of the Blessed Virgin is officially celebrated on 15th August each year although usually overlooked by all but the Anglo-Catholic wing of the CofE.

In the Middle Ages, it was felt that Mary would always listen to the cries of the poor and helpless as well as sinners in general. Therefore, cathedrals had Lady Chapel's usually located behind the High Altar. At the Reformation many of the legends and doctrines around Mary were modified or rejected by the Protestants. Nearly all the stained glass windows depicting St Mary were destroyed with the notable exception of the parish church at Fairford, which is well worth a visit!

Until the Reformation many cathedrals and parish churches had a statute of Mary above the west doorway. In 1955 Mrs E. Atherton, wife of the rector at Cowley, wrote the following: "The registers date back to 1681; the earlier ones have presumably been lost. So has the image, no doubt the Virgin, in the niche over the Porch." The parish church at Cowley has a fascinating history and a unique atmosphere. What better way to conclude than by reflecting on the Collect for the BVM:

Almighty and everlasting God,
 who stooped to raise fallen humanity
 through the child-bearing of blessed Mary;
 grant that we, who have seen your glory
 revealed in our human nature
 and your love made perfect in our weakness,
 may daily be renewed in your image
 and conformed to the pattern of your Son
 Jesus Christ our Lord,
 who is alive and reigns with you,
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 one God, now and for ever.
 Amen

Elkstone - The parish church of St John the Evangelist

John is mostly remembered for being the one who proclaimed Jesus as the "Word made flesh" (John 1: 14) and who is the "disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21: 20). The Gospel narrative speaks of John as one of the sons of Zebedee who left their fishing nets to follow Jesus; therefore much that was written about Saint James (*Parish Link, June 2018*) also applies to

Saint John. Jesus called them "Sons of Thunder" after they wanted to punish some Samaritan villages by calling down fire from heaven (Luke 9: 54). Never the less, Jesus loved them and John's gospel clearly expresses that love throughout. These two brothers were privileged to be with Jesus at the most important events in His life: the transfiguration, the last supper, the garden of Gethsemane, with Jesus and his mother at the foot of the Cross and as a witness of the resurrection who "saw and believed".

John was born around the year 15 AD, which would make him the youngest of the twelve disciples. The Acts of the Apostles tells of how John and Peter were imprisoned then released on condition they would stop preaching about Jesus. However, they went on to confirm new converts in Samaria but the Jewish religious leaders again had them arrested and beaten up. John and Peter affirmed Paul's ministry some 14 years after his conversion. John was a "pillar" of the church in Jerusalem assisted at an important meeting there in 51 AD.

John seems to have remained mostly in Jerusalem although he is credited with founding and having oversight of all the churches in Asia Minor, now modern Turkey. In the second general persecution around 95 AD, John was arrested and sent to Rome where according to tradition he was miraculously saved from death when thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil.

The Emperor Domitian banished John to exile on the Isle of Patmos. It was here that John received amazing visions that he recorded in the Book of Revelation. Only a year or two later the next Roman Emperor allowed John to settle in Ephesus where he became leader of the local church and wrote his gospel primarily to refute various heretical teachings. He is also credited with writing three epistles.

Whilst hanging from the cross, Jesus had entrusted his mother into John's care. According to tradition, Mary accompanied John to the city of Ephesus. John died there at the age of about 94. He was buried on a nearby mountain and later pilgrims carried away the dust from his tomb, which was said to have miraculous properties.

The parish church at Elkstone is dedicated to St John the Evangelist. It is the highest church in the Cotswold Hills and is regarded by many as one of the finest and yet least known Norman Churches in England. Just inside the Porch there is magnificent carved tympanum over the door. Inside are two superb chancel arches dividing the stone vaulted chancel into choir and sanctuary. A hidden stairway leads to a first floor pigeon loft or columbarium; one of only a very



few in England! The church is adorned with Norman carvings including gargoyles at the four corners of the tower.

St John the Evangelist is depicted in a stained glass window in the south wall of the chancel. Above his head is an eagle, his traditional symbol, whilst John is holding a chalice containing a little green dragon, a symbol from the 13th Century. According to the "Acts of John", a book subsequently condemned as heretical, the High Priest of the goddess Diana at Ephesus tested John's faith by challenging him to drink from a poisoned cup. John duly prayed over the cup, drank from it and survived unharmed. Just beforehand two men had died from drinking the poison but John's prayer promptly restored them to life! The little green dragon in the stained glass window represents the poison and this name has been adopted by the village's only pub.

Today the influence of St John the Evangelist may be seen in the priority which the church gives to a straightforward presentation of the good news of Jesus Christ. The congregation has a well-deserved reputation for being friendly towards visitors.

Saint John the Evangelist is sometimes referred to as Saint John the Theologian. His feast day is celebrated on 27th December. Sunday by Sunday our services include John's call to repentance based on his first epistle (1 John 1: 8-9):

"Hear what Saint John says:

*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,
and the truth is not in us.*

*If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just,
and will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

Rendcomb and Stratton - The parish churches of St Peter

Christians around the world honour Peter as the fisherman who gave his life to Jesus Christ and was gradually transformed to become the right-hand man of Jesus himself, the leader of the early church and a father of the faith.

Peter and his brother Andrew grew up in the fishing village of Bethsaida on the Western shore of the Sea of Galilee. One day Jesus was walking along the shoreline when he spotted Peter and Andrew. "Come follow me", Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:18-20). At once they left their nets and followed him. Soon afterwards the same thing happened again when Jesus called two other local fishermen: James and John, the sons of Zebedee. From that moment Peter became a new person with a new purpose and orientation.

Early in three of the Gospel accounts there is a story of Jesus visiting Peter's new home in the nearby fishing village of Capernaum where he healed Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus used Peter's boat when he instructed the crowd (Luke 5:3). One of the incidents Peter is most famous for happened on a stormy night as the disciples boat was battling against the waves on the Sea of Galilee. As dawn was breaking they saw Jesus coming out towards them and walking on the

water! They were terrified, thinking it was a ghost, but Peter asked Jesus to call him out onto the lake with him. Jesus called and Peter took a few steps until overcome by fear and doubt causing him to start sinking. Peter's faith may have failed but at least he tried!



Once when Jesus asked the disciples a question, Peter demonstrated remarkable insight and depth of faith by proclaiming: "*You are Christ, the Son of the living God*", to which Jesus responded: "*You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.*" (Matthew 16:16-18). Peter is the English translation for the Aramaic equivalent of Cephas ('the rock') but he was originally called Simon meaning 'son of Jonah' and all four Gospels refer to him as 'Simon Peter'. Jesus went on to speak these words over Peter: "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*" Later on the church recognised Jesus' strong affirmation of Peter by depicting him as holding a pair of keys.

On a different occasion Peter rebuked, and in turn was rebuked by Jesus when the Master prophesied that he would suffer and die (Mark 8:32-33). At night when soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter tried to defend Jesus by lashing out and cutting off a man's ear. Far from commending Peter for his courage, Jesus healed the man's wound as well as commanding Peter to lay down his blood-stained weapon: "*Put away your sword for whoever lives by the sword will die by the sword*" (Matthew 26:42). From then on Peter never again threatened anyone's life but rather sought the conversion of opponents. Peter became a man who would rather die than kill.

Peter alone followed as Jesus was led away to prison but he demonstrated momentary weakness when he denied his Lord three times (Matthew 26:69-75). Peter was privileged, after Mary Magdalene, to see Jesus upon his resurrection (Luke 24:34 and 1 Corinthians 15:5) and soon afterwards Jesus graciously forgave his momentary weakness by restoring him. Jesus first words to Peter had been: "*Come follow me*" and his last words to him were: "*You must follow me*" (John 21:22).

Peter gradually matured in the Christian faith and exercised a leadership role in the early church at Jerusalem:

- he designated Judas' successor,
- was first of the apostles to preach to the Gentiles,
- the first to perform miracles,
- preached to thousands, many of whom were converted.

However, in about 43AD he was imprisoned by Herod Agrippa but escaped thanks to the guidance of an angel. He joined with Paul in strongly proclaiming that the Gospel was not just for the Jewish people but also the Gentiles; the entire human race.

There is an early tradition that Peter went to Rome where he became the first bishop. If this is true then Peter and Paul must have been in Rome at the same time and exercising complementary leadership roles: Peter witnessing to the Lordship of Jesus Christ whilst Paul developed an understanding of what this would mean in practical ways for the life of the Church. Peter became known as 'the Prince of the Apostles' whilst Paul's letter to the Galatians (2:9) refers to Peter, James and John as 'pillars' of the Church.

To some people the preaching of Peter was blasphemy. To have rejected Rome's many pagan gods, as evidenced even today at the Pantheon, and to affirm Christ was to tamper with the philosophical foundations of the state. He must have known what happened to the rebellion led by Spartacus in the previous century. How the Roman Empire rounded up the gladiators that had escaped and had them crucified at intervals of about 100 feet for over 100 miles along the Appian Way! In his later years Peter would have needed the courage of a lion!

Peter is credited with writing two epistles. The first is addressed to those who have converted from Judaism to Christianity to help them endure persecution. His second epistle was written from Rome shortly before his execution to warn against false teachers. Tradition has it that Peter and Paul were both martyred in about 64AD during the Emperor Nero's persecution at a site near Nero's circus, which is now known as Vatican Hill. Peter requested to be crucified upside-down since he did not consider himself worthy to suffer in the same way as Jesus Christ. He was buried beneath what is now Michelangelo's famous dome.

Peter was by nature an impulsive character and he often got things wrong; but he also had moments of inspiration. Peter's faith matured and he became the most important leader of the church in Jerusalem and in Rome. Peter is the patron saint of fishermen, watchmakers and butchers.

The parish church of St Peter at Rendcomb was almost entirely rebuilt in the early 16th century. A wonderful 12th century font is situated neat the South Porch. It is tub shaped and similar to one in Hereford Cathedral. According to Verey and Brooks this font was brought from the chapel at Elmore Court and then used as a garden ornament until the mid 19th century! There are 12 carved figures around the circular font bowl, each showing the distinctive sign of one of the apostles, except for an uncarved one, in place of Judas, facing North. The detail of the apostles on this Norman font is exquisite, and in an excellent state of repair.

The parish church of St Peter at Stratton has a beautiful stained glass window on the South wall. A rugged looking St Peter is depicted clutching a Bible close to his chest whilst his right hand is holding two keys. At his feet a cockerel with head raised appears to be crowing as a reminder of Peter's denial during the events of Holy Week. An inscription states: "In memory of our father Thomas Hannyngton Irving Child priest of this parish 1875 - 1888." It may be worth noting that the local CofE Primary School has adopted St Peter's symbol of the crossed keys. Each year down the centuries the Church has held patronal festivals on 29th June for both Peter and Paul. Here is the prayer in honour of St Peter that's said on that day:

Merciful Lord,
Who called impetuous and faltering Peter to follow you,
we thank you that your grace allows your Church
to be built on the rocks of our frailty.
Guide and sustain your Church with your Holy Spirit,
that it may feed and tend your flock.
May our love for you be faithful and true.
Keep our vision focused on your presence,
that we may follow in trust and hope.
Amen

North Cerney - The parish church of All Saints

The New Testament has 64 references to the "saints" meaning anyone who belongs to Christ by faith. However, right from the earliest years the church has used the term "saint" to identify certain individuals who have inspired others towards holy living.

During our Sunday services the congregation usually stands to say the Apostle's Creed which encapsulates the key teaching of the Apostles although it was written at least 150 years after they had all died. The Creed ends with these familiar words:

"...I believe in the' Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen."

The phrase "holy catholic church" doesn't mean the Roman Catholic Church but rather all those around the world who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.

But what are we to make of the "communion of saints"? This is in-fact a much bigger concept than the celebration of Holy Communion in which believers come together to remember Jesus' sacrifice through the bread and the wine. The communion of saints consists of today's church sharing in the same salvation as those believers who have died whilst also including those still to be born. We all share in the same blessings:

- God's forgiveness and salvation (Romans 5: 10)
- freedom from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2)

- eternal life (1 John 3: 16)
- permanently adopted into God's family (John 1: 12-13)
- being able to serve God (Ephesians 2: 10)
- the gift of an eternal home in heaven (Revelation 21: 22-27)



The title "saint" is used for all those heroes of the faith who the church has canonized but some saints can be designated as a "martyr" or a "confessor." A martyr has been killed for his or her Christian beliefs whereas a confessor has been tortured or persecuted for his or her faith, but not killed.

According to Martin Palmer in the book "Sacred Land" (2012), a church dedicated to All Saints: "...commemorates those who now reside in heaven and can be approached by any lost soul wishing to be saved. This was a core belief of medieval Christianity: invocation of the saints and their intercession could save even the worst sinner". Even today the Roman Catholic Church believes that: "Seeking the intercession of a patron saint does not mean that one cannot approach God directly in prayer; rather, it's like asking a friend to pray for you to God, while you also pray - except, in this case, the friend is already in heaven, and can pray to God for us without ceasing." By contrast, the CofE takes the view that stories about saints such as Mary the Mother of Christ can provide inspiration but our prayers must only be directed to God the Father, through (or in the name of) the Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

North Cerney parish, which includes the hamlets of Woodmancote and Calmsden, lies four miles north of Cirencester in the valley of the River Churn. The parish church at North Cerney has a medieval cross in the churchyard. The church is dedicated of All Saints and according to British History On-Line: "The parish registers survive, with some gaps, from 1568 for baptisms and from 1574 for marriages and burials." The interior of the church is strikingly beautiful and has many interesting features. For example, the north chapel has colourful wood carvings of St Martin who is cutting his cloak (legend has it that he gave half his cloak to a beggar), the Blessed Virgin Mary is in the centre and the third figure is St Urban holding a bunch of grapes. A curious mistake arose when the wood carver confused him with Urban the Great and gave him a tiara!

The CofE publication "Common Worship: Festivals" (2008) has a different saint for nearly every day of the year. Incidentally, at the time the church authorities regarded many of these saints as heretics but, like John Wesley, they have subsequently been adopted as glowing examples of the Christian life! However, there are countless men and women through the centuries who, unknown and unrecognised, have avoided and resisted the temptation to sin and who have focused their attention and energies on God and good works. These unknown saints have kept a low profile whilst lovingly performing ordinary jobs.

The Christian tradition of remembering saints and martyrs by dedicating a specific day to them each year began in the 4th century AD, but it wasn't until 609AD that Pope Boniface IV decided to remember all martyrs. Originally 13th May (first Sunday after Pentecost) was designated as the Feast of All Holy Martyrs. Later, in 837AD, Pope Gregory IV extended the festival to remember all the saints, changed its name to Feast of All Saints and changed the date to 1st November. More recently in 2003 Pope John Paul II said this: "*All Saints Day invites us to turn our gaze to the immense multitude of those who have already reached the blessed land, and points us on the path that will lead us to that destination.*" All Saints Day is also known as All

Hallows Day and on the evening before (31st October) worshippers would traditionally prepare themselves by prayer and fasting. In the ancient Celtic culture at Hallowe'en the walls between our world and the next were believed to become thin and porous, allowing spirits to pass through, come back to life and damage crops in the fields. No wonder that even today Hallowe'en is still a spooky and overly commercialised excuse for having an outdoor party!

All Souls Day is marked on the 2nd November. It was originally established so that congregations (the Church Militant) could remember and pray for the souls of people in Purgatory (the Church Suffering) in which those who have died atone for their less grave sins before joining those in Heaven (the Church Triumphant). However, this is definitely against the teaching of the Church of England's 39 Articles: "*The Roman doctrine concerning purgatory, pardons, worshipping and adoration (both of images and of relics) and the invocation of saints is a futile thing foolishly conceived and grounded on no evidence of Scripture. On the contrary this teaching is repugnant to the Word of God*" (Article 22). Some CofE churches hold a service for the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed often focussing on believing family members "who have recently gone to be with our Lord".

Many of the points made in this brief article are nicely summarised in the following Collect for All Saints Day:

Almighty God,
you have knit together your elect
in one communion and fellowship
in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord:
grant us grace so to follow your blessed saints
in all virtuous and godly living,
that we may come to those inexpressible joys
that you have prepared for those who truly love you;
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.
Amen

For all the saints quiz with £10 prize!

All through 2018 the Parish Link magazine has run a series of articles about our local patron saints, which is culminating with a challenging quiz for readers to enjoy.

Rules

1. Closing date 31st December 2018
2. Entries preferably by email to champion.margaret.ann@googlemail.com
3. Your answers must link with each question number
4. Please state your name and contact details
5. Only one entry per person
6. Margaret Champion will assess the entries
7. Those entries having the correct answers will go into a draw to be made by the Revd David Minns on Monday 7th January 2019
8. The answers, a list of the correct entries, and the name of the prize winner will be announced on CVB website and in the February edition of Parish Link magazine

Your name:

Your parish church:

Your email address or phone number:

	16 questions worth 23 points	Your answers
1.	Which two of nine CVB parish churches have adopted the same male patron saint? (2 points)	- -
2.	What is the name of the Roman city in which England's first recorded Christian martyr was beheaded?	-
3.	Which one of our nine parish churches has a patron saint called Mary who is traditionally regarded as an inspiration for the contemplative life, converts, glove makers, hairstylists, penitent sinners and pharmacists?	-
4.	Three of our parish churches are dedicated to female saints. What are each of their names and relevant villages? (3 points)	- - -
5.	Rendcomb parish church has 12 carved figures around the circular font bowl, each showing the distinctive sign. One figure facing North has not been carved. What is his name?	-
6.	During the reign of Queen Mary 1 st , a certain Bishop of Gloucester was burnt at the stake but in what year?	-

7.	What is the name of the parish church dedicated to the hermit who protected a wild deer when Flavius Wamba, King of the Visigoths, was hunting in the forest?	-
8.	According to tradition in the 9 th century the body of a certain saint was exhumed and taken from Jerusalem to the Iberian Peninsula. What is the Spanish name of the popular pilgrimage route leading to the saint's shrine? <i>(clue: It was the subject of a film in 2010 starring Martin Sheen)</i>	-
9.	Which three medieval kings have visited the parish church of St Giles, Coberley? (3 points)	- - -
10.	The patron saint of Cowley parish church is credited with bursting into a song known as the Magnificat but where exactly can this be found in the New Testament?	-
11.	Which nobleman's heart lies close to Lombard, his faithful charger, whilst his body was laid to rest at Great Malvern? <i>(clue: similar to the local patron saint)</i>	-
12.	Name the church which has a hidden stairway leading to a first floor pigeon loft or columbarium, one of only a very few in England?	-
13.	The North Chapel in the parish church of All Saints, North Cerney, has a colourful woodcarving of someone holding a bunch of grapes and wearing a tiara. Who is this meant to be depicting? <i>(clue: a saint, not a Pope)</i>	-
14.	In the 1460s there was a Weavers Guild at Cirencester that had the chancel rebuilt in which of our parish churches?	-
15.	The South Wall of Stratton parish church depicts a saintly person in a stained glass window. What are the three distinguishing features indicating this is St Peter? (3 points)	- - -
16.	Finish this sentence: "Among the roses of the martyrs brightly shines Saint....."? <i>(clue: s/he isn't one of the patron saints in any of the CVB parish churches)</i>	-