

Readings: 1 John 2: 18 – 25; Psalm 109 (110): 1 – 4; Matthew 5: 13 – 19.

Hilary was born into a rich pagan family in Poitiers in about AD 315. He had a thorough education including philosophy, which led him to the conviction that God can only be One, and so to the study of the Christian scriptures.

In AD 350, by which time he was married, he was converted and baptized, and five years later, when he may still have been a layman, he was chosen as bishop of his native city.

His consecration as bishop coincided with the emergence of one of the three sons of Constantine as sole Roman Emperor. Constantius, with his power base in the East, had sided with the Arian heresy which rejected the teaching of the Council of Nicea (held in 325) that the Son of God was *of one substance* with the Father. The leading defender of the Nicene position was Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, and Constantius called several councils to persuade bishops to sign a condemnation of Athanasius. One of these councils was held in 356 soon after Hilary became Bishop of Poitiers, and he, with only one other bishop, refused to sign. They, like other 'non-signers' before them, were exiled to the East. During his three years of exile Hilary wrote a treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity. It was this work which was the principal reason for which in 1851 he was declared a Doctor of the Church with the title *Doctor of the Divinity of Christ*.

Over the next four years Constantius made several attempts to force Arian doctrine on the whole Church. Athanasius and Hilary remained committed to the orthodox view that Christ is the true Son of God. The Arians decided that Hilary was more dangerous in the East than in the West, so in 360 he was allowed to return to Gaul and in the following year presided over a Synod of bishops which accepted the Nicene Doctrine. This marked the end of Arianism in the Western Church.

In 364, after further work to restore orthodox teaching, Hilary returned to Poitiers and spent his last years in the care of his diocese.

Hilary died late in 367, still under sixty, worn out by his journeys and his years in exile. He was buried in Poitiers in on 13th January 368, and that date has since been observed as his feast day. His shrine has been damaged several times over the centuries, and little of his relics remain, but the church on the site of his tomb remains a place of pilgrimage.