

Readings for Today: *Isaiah 61: 1 – 3; Verses from Psalm 88(89); Matthew 25: 31 – 40.*

Martin was born in what is now western Hungary in about AD 336, but soon moved to Pavia in northern Italy, when his father, an army officer was transferred there. Although his parents were pagans, Martin tried to be accepted as a catechumen when he was ten. His father refused to allow this, and when Martin was fifteen had him drafted into the army.

After some three years Martin was serving in Amiens, when he performed the action by which he is most remembered – and depicted in statues and paintings. One winter he saw a man, scantily dressed, asking for alms. Having nothing else to give, Martin cut his military cloak in two and gave one piece to the beggar. In a dream that night, he saw Jesus wearing the half cloak, and heard him say “Martin has covered me with this cloak”. As a result Martin sought and received baptism.

A little later Martin refused to fight with the army, telling the ruler “I am a soldier of Christ and it is not lawful for me to fight.” He was imprisoned, but after the military emergency he was released.

In about 360 Hilary, bishop of Poitiers (13th January), gave Martin a piece of land which became the site of a monastic community – probably the first in Gaul. He spent ten years teaching and preaching and then, in 371, the people of Tours elected him, against his will, as their bishop.

For the next twenty-five years Martin lived as both monk and bishop, founding monasteries to serve as centres of evangelisation – especially in the country districts. He travelled throughout his large diocese, on foot, on a donkey or by boat, caring for the faithful.

In 397 Martin was taken ill in a distant part of his diocese. He died there on 8th November, and was buried in Tours three days later. His tomb became a place of pilgrimage and a great basilica was built over it. The shrine was desecrated by Protestants in 1562, and the basilica was destroyed in the French Revolution. Martin’s relics now lie in a modern church on the site.

Martin was, it seems, the first non-martyr saint (except apostles and other biblical saints) to receive a widespread veneration outside his own diocese. Bede tells us that when Augustine arrived in Canterbury in 597, he was given an old church – presumably pre-dating the Anglo-Saxon invasion – it was dedicated to St Martin. A parish church still stands on the site: part of its fabric dates from the former church – the first Canterbury Cathedral.