

Suggested Readings: *Hebrews 5: 1 – 4; Psalm 3: 3 – 5, 8; Matthew 16: 24 – 26.*

For those who live in or near Greenwich this is an important local celebration.

Alphege (Aelfheah in Saxon) was born about the middle of the tenth century, at a time when a great reform of the English Church was underway, led by (St) Dunstan and supported by King Edgar. Alphege became a monk at Deerhurst in Gloucestershire, and later lived as a hermit. When he was about thirty Dunstan appointed him Abbot of Bath, and after that Bishop of Winchester. In 1005 Alphege became Archbishop of Canterbury. By this time England was ruled by Edgar's son Ethelred (known as 'the Unready', a play on his name meaning 'without good advice'), and Danish war bands were continually invading the country. In 1009 a great army began a systematic plundering and by 1011 they had arrived in Kent and began to besiege Canterbury. Through the treachery of an archdeacon they captured the city, took Alphege prisoner, and held him for ransom at their camp in Greenwich. They set the huge price of £3000 for his release, but Alphege forbade the ransom to be paid, realising that it would impoverish the poorest people.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that this so infuriated his captors that *they seized the bishop, led him to their hustings on the Saturday in the octave of Easter (April 19th) and then pelted him there with bones and the heads of cattle; and one of them struck him on the head with the butt of an axe, so that with the blow he sank down and his holy blood fell on the earth, and sent forth his holy soul to God's kingdom.* The Viking leaders, who had not authorised the killing, arranged that Alphege should be buried in St Paul's Cathedral. His body was later translated to the north side of the high altar of Canterbury Cathedral, where it became the focus of devotion.

Lanfranc, the first Norman archbishop, questioned whether Alphege should be honoured as a martyr, since he had not died because of his faith. However Anselm, who was to be Lanfranc's successor, replied that, like John the Baptist, Alphege had died for justice, and so was rightly recognized as a martyr. He was the first archbishop of Canterbury to be so venerated, but not the last. In 1170 his successor Thomas Becket, when about to be murdered, commended himself to God and Saint Alphege.

The parish church of Greenwich is dedicated to Saint Alphege.