

Homily for the Patronal Festival of St Edmund, King and Martyr

20 November 2009

Complete books on St Edmund, King and Martyr, patron of the Abbey, are rare. So it is with some pleasure when I discovered that York Medieval Press have published this year a series of essays collected into a book entitled *St Edmund, King and Martyr. Changing Images of a Medieval Saint*.

As far as I can see, its central theme is that the image of a saint changes according to time and place, and according to fashion. Saints come and go, as witness the recent new popularity of St Therese of Lisieux. A saint's image and meaning is subject to many and changing contexts, even though, as far as St. Edmund is concerned, the image remains pretty constant: he is either shown crowned or shot with arrows.

People are devoted to a particular saint; they have patrons, but what they are devoted to in the saint perhaps varies and changes. The early account of St Edmund's death in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for instance, does not, significantly, mention any martyrdom; we are just told that he fought fiercely and was killed by the Danes who then conquered all the land. Fifty years later, in the account we had this morning at Matins from Abbo of Fleury, he had become a martyr, and by the time the highly influential abbey of Bury St. Edmunds had developed, our saint had become more than a martyr, he had become the patron of a large religious, political, fiscal and legal entity in eastern England called 'the Liberty of Saint Edmund' which included a property in the city of London with a street called Bevis Marks. This street name is thought to be a corruption of Bury St Edmunds, I'm not sure how, but you'll probably know it is where the oldest synagogue in London is found and, perhaps appropriately, the expensive Bevis Marks restaurant, I notice, advertises Bénédictine liqueur. St Edmund, as patron of his Liberty, now defended his own. But he became even more powerful, because by the time of the Wilton Diptych, around 1400, he had become patron of all England; a nationalist saint and quintessential English king, who rejected all foreign overlordship, though he came too early to be found singing 'Rule Britannia'.

Through martyrdom, patronage, and struggling to prevent Britons becoming slaves, Edmund, like other saints, was above all an intercessor between God and the world. He was, and is, sensitive to those who call on him for help. Saints only become powerful, perhaps ironically, through their intimacy with those who revere them, they interact with our daily concerns, and so the miracles associated with Saint Edmund are mostly examples of unspectacular gentleness and charity.

What I think is an important lesson to derive from this fact is that saints as helpers, healers, and spokesmen, and we include St. Edmund here, become our representatives; they closely identify with us. In the veneration of a saint, there is an element of co-dependency. And this degree of ownership of a saint by someone who seeks his or her protection creates an intimacy between both. Hence it is that the early St Edmund, distant warlord, mighty warrior and soldier, was transformed to the later St Edmund of the late Middle Ages: gentle, young, fragile, virginal, and weak like ourselves, even if he still carried a couple of symbolic arrows. So the Edmund of our time is praised for his humility, generosity, fatherly care of the poor and needy, rather than for his martial arts. Edmund's self-sacrificial path of passive resistance resonates with Christ's own kingship; he is pre-eminently a saint because he imitates Christ.

In the narrative told by the cloister bosses in Norwich Cathedral, St Edmund, martyr and king, is significantly shown alongside the bosses depicting Our Lord's Passion and Resurrection. We read that Edmund was bound, mocked, beaten and whipped before he achieved the victory by

his suffering. In September this year, I stayed in the Irish College in Paris which now owns the large painting of the martyrdom of St Edmund that once formed the altarpiece of our monastery church in Paris. He is shown in this as another St Sebastian, but also as a king, and we who are members and friends of this Benedictine community should remember that it was the Benedictine reforms of the 10th century which gave to England the clearest image of a Christian king, whose office, like that of his Master, was one of service and sacrifice on behalf of his people: '*Rex angelorum et Rex anglorum*', 'King of Angels, King of the Angles' as one of the hymns written in his honour has it, using the famous pun ascribed to St. Gregory, 'Angels not Angles'.