

Hymn for St Alban

[Tune: Hyfrydol]

1 In a town below the hillside,
As the sun began to set,
Came a priest, beseeching shelter
From a man he'd never met.
Alban hid him from the soldiers;
Learnt from him of God's own Son,
Took his place before the Governor,
With his life in Christ begun.

2 With rough hands and ropes they bound him,
Dragged him to the river's side.
There, he looked upon the water,
Saw the flow of Jordan's tide,
Walked barefoot across the streambed
And continued on his way.
Reached the trees upon the hilltop
In the early light of day.

3 'You are charged with grave offences',
said the Judge upon the hill.
'Do you bow to Caesar's power,
his divine and perfect will?'

'I am Alban,' cried the martyr, '
And I worship and adore
neither Caesar nor his servants –
but the true and living Lord.'

4 With a sword-stroke, there they killed him:
Felled his body to the ground,
Jeered and mocked the martyr's witness,
Laughed with cruel, spiteful sound.
But, just where his blood had fallen,
Like the rain upon the earth,
Flowers sprang at once to blossom –
Signs of Alban's grace and worth.

5 On a hill beside a river
Stands the shrine of Britain's saint;
Honoured, loved by those who know him,
Freed at last from all restraint.
For he stands with saints in glory,
With his prayers, our feet are shod.
May our courage never fail us
As we journey home to God.

Who was St. Alban?

Alban is the earliest Christian in Britain who is known by name and, according to tradition, the first British martyr. He was a soldier in the Roman army stationed at Verulamium, a city about twenty miles northeast of London, now called St. Alban's. He gave shelter to a Christian priest who was fleeing from persecution, and was converted by him. When officers came to Alban's house, he dressed himself in the garments of the priest and gave himself up. Alban was tortured and martyred in place of the priest, on the hilltop where the Cathedral of St. Alban's now stands. The traditional date of his martyrdom is 303 or 304, but recent studies suggest that the year was actually 209, during the persecution under the Emperor Septimius Severus.

The site of Alban's martyrdom soon became a shrine. King Offa of Mercia established a monastery there about the year 793, and in the high Middle Ages St. Alban's ranked as the premier Abbey in England. The great Norman abbey church, begun in 1077, now serves as the cathedral of the diocese of St. Alban's, established in 1877. It is the second longest church in England (Winchester Cathedral is the longest, by six feet), and it is built on higher ground than any other English cathedral. In a chapel east of the choir and high Altar, there are remains of the fourteenth century marble shrine of St. Alban.

The Venerable Bede gives this account of Alban's trial: "When Alban was brought in, the judge happened to be standing before an altar, offering sacrifice to devils ... 'What is your family and race?' demanded the judge. 'How does my family concern you?' replied Alban; 'If you wish to know the truth about my religion, know that I am a Christian and am ready to do a Christian's duty.' 'I demand to know your name,' insisted the judge. 'Tell me at once.' 'My parents named me Alban,' he answered, 'and I worship and adore the living and true God, who created all things.'"¹

¹ *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints* (New York: Church Pub. Inc., 2010), 434.