ST ALBAN – 20th June

Alban should be the patron saint of anyone who impulsively offers to help a stranger in need… and finds their own life turned upside down as a result.

The story goes that Alban was a Roman citizen quietly living in England in the third century (although some recent scholars now set the events a hundred years earlier). Then, miles away in Rome, the emperor, Diocletian ordered a persecution of the Christians. This would have had nothing to do with Alban, except that suddenly he found a desperate priest on his doorstep, being hunted down by local soldiers. Alban decided to give the priest shelter, and within days was converted to Christianity himself, and then baptised.

As if this was not brave enough, when the soldiers arrived, Alban decided to take the priest's place. He dressed up in the priest's clothes to enable the priest to escape. Not surprisingly, the soldiers then arrested Alban himself. Now a Christian, Alban refused to offer sacrifice to the Roman gods, and so was condemned to death.

But the story doesn't end there, for Alban went to his execution with such holiness and serenity that one of the executioners was converted, and the other executioner's eyes fell out (or so the story was told by the Venerable Bede). Alban was buried nearby, and at the time of Bede there was a church and shrine near the spot, pilgrims travelled to visit, and it became an established place of healing. Bede describes the hill as "adorned with wild flowers of every kind" and as a spot "whose natural beauty had long fitted it as a place to be hallowed by the blood of a blessed martyr". The shrine still stands in St Alban's Abbey. As the very first English martyr, Alban's popularity extended all over England, and nine ancient English churches were dedicated to him. He is also depicted as one of the saints in the East Window in St Bridget's.