

## **Sunday 19 November 2023 - Feast of St Edmund King and Martyr**

### **Revelation 1.1-4 and 2.1-5**

### **Luke 18. 35-end**

The saint who is the patron saint of this diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich is not really very well known, which is not surprising because not a great deal is known about him (but neither do we know much about St George who is after all our national patron saint). But what exactly do we know about this brave man, who was an East Anglian through and through ?

Edmund was King of East Anglia, and also a martyr. Born of Saxon stock in 840 or 841, Edmund was brought up as a Christian and became King of the East Angles before 865, presumably in succession to his father although this is not confirmed. In the years 869 and 870 the Great Army of the Vikings under their leader Ingwar invaded East Anglia. Edmund led his army against them, but was defeated and captured. He refused to deny his Christian faith or to rule as Ingwar's vassal. He was then killed, whether by being scourged, shot with arrows and then beheaded, or by being "spread-eagled" as an offering to the gods in accordance with Viking practice elsewhere. His death took place at Hellesden in Suffolk; his body was buried in a small chapel nearby.

In about the year 915 his body was found to be incorrupt (pretty remarkable considering the treatment it had been given) and was transferred to Bedricsworth (now called Bury St Edmunds). In 925 King Athelstan founded a community of two priests and four deacons to take care of the shrine. The landing of another Danish army at Ipswich in 1010 placed it in danger, so its custodian removed it to London, where it remained for three years, after which it was returned to Bury.

By now the cult of Edmund King and Martyr, like those of St Oswald and Ethelbert, fulfilled the ideals of Old English heroism, provincial independence, and Christian sanctity, and had grown considerably. As king

he had won the hearts of his subjects by his care of the poor and his steady suppression of wrong-doing.

In 1020 the Danish King Canute ordered a stone church to be built at Bury and the clerks to be instructed by Benedictine monks. His policy of reconciliation between Danes and Anglo-Saxons through reparation for his compatriots' misdeeds found expression in 1028 when he gave his abbey a charter of jurisdiction over the town which was growing up around the abbey together with notable endowments of land. King Edward the Confessor continued this policy and extended the jurisdiction over most of west Suffolk in 1044. Bury soon became one of the most important and powerful of all the English Benedictine abbeys. In 1095 Edmund's body was transferred to the large new Norman church; in 1198 it was re-enshrined, and Bury St Edmunds became an important centre of pilgrimage throughout the Middle Ages, but at the Reformation his body was removed to an unknown place and never returned.

More than sixty churches in England are dedicated to Edmund, including very near to us the parish church in Bromeswell as well as the Chapel at Hollesley Bay prison. The most famous representation of him is in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Wilton Diptych at the National Gallery, where Edmund and Edward the Confessor are depicted as two royal patrons of England, who present King Richard II to the Virgin and Child. In fact around this time there were calls for Edmund to replace George as THE patron saint of England, but that never seems to have left the starting blocks.

Thus we know that we are talking about a king who cared about the welfare and safety of his people, and was determined that his kingdom would not become a byword for wrong-doing. We are extremely fortunate to have such a patron in this diocese.

Recently, I was mulling over the current issue of the Big Issue while I was enjoying a pint of beer in a local hostelry. On the front page was a photograph of our present King Charles, who has inaugurated something

called the Coronation Food Project. The object of this, as he puts it in an article on one of the inside pages, is to bridge the gap between Food Waste and Food Need. He has recognised that an enormous number of foodbanks have sprung up all over the country, especially following the pandemic and also as a result of the current cost of living crisis. Others have taken up the issue of surplus supermarket food, but there is a need to connect this surplus to the places where it can be of the most benefit. In this way the King has demonstrated again (along with the mission of the Prince's Trust in getting young people into work by helping them to set up their own businesses) his concern for people who are disadvantaged and would not otherwise have had the opportunity they have been given. Thus he is showing that he is a worthy successor to Edmund King and Martyr. We can say that both kings are worthy followers of Jesus Christ.

PBW – 17.11.2023