

Art reflections prepared by Dr Sophia Errey: St Alban. 22nd June

Alban is known as one of the first martyrs in Britain, executed sometime in the third century (between 209 and 305). While there are earlier accounts of an unnamed beheaded martyr, the first full account of his death was written around 750. This recounts that he was converted when he sheltered a priest who was fleeing from persecution, and then offered himself in place of the priest. Despite torture he refused to worship the Roman gods, declaring "I worship and adore the true and living God who created all things" – words still used in the services in his honour.

The place of execution is also unknown, but by the early 8th century there was a memorial to him on a hilltop near the Roman site Verulamium, now called St Albans in Hertfordshire.

The Abbey of St Albans, replacing a destroyed earlier church, was begun by the Normans in 1077, and by the 12th century it was the most important abbey in England, before its dissolution in 1539.



The abbey church is now the Cathedral of the Diocese of St Albans. It is a striking church, with a powerful interior, partly early Norman (the near section below, with rounded arches from 1077) and partly later (1200)



The massive tower is the only 11th century church tower surviving in England. A memorial shrine marks the reputed site of Alban's execution.



The Abbey is also noted for its choir, and the International Organ Festival held there – the earliest known organist on the Abbey, named Adam, lived around 1300.

Between 1217 and 1259 a brilliantly talented man named Matthew Paris was a monk at St Albans. Among his books, which he both wrote (in French) and enriched with paintings is a *Life of St Alban*, which is now in Trinity College, Dublin.



Matthew Paris – The Execution of St Alban

The Birth of John the Baptist 24th June

Luke 1 5-25 describes how, when a priest named Zechariah was offering incense in the Temple, Gabriel appeared to him and told him that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son and

14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

But Zechariah, incredulous, demurred, since the couple had remained childless to an advanced age, which was then considered a mark of disgrace, and an indication that the couple were in some way guilty before God – hence Luke's assurance in v6
6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.

Zechariah's skepticism resulted in his being struck dumb.

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. 59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." 61 They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." 62 Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?"

Unlike the special circumstances and setting associated with the birth of Jesus in Luke's account, John was assumed to have been born at home, and so artists have always felt free to represent the birth according to the settings and customs of childbirth with which they were familiar.

Unfortunately the cycle painted by the great master of the early Renaissance, Giotto, in the Peruzzi Chapel in Santa Croce, Florence is damaged. The artist combined a birth scene – Elizabeth is actually in labour, which is never the case in depictions of Mary – and the name John being written down by his father as described in v 63.



In 1485 a wealthy Florentine, Giovanni Tornabuoni, commissioned Domenico Ghirlandaio, who had the largest art workshop in Florence, to execute a large cycle of paintings focusing on the lives of Mary and John in the main chapel of Santa Maria Novella. (John the Baptist is the the patron of the city, and the famous Baptistry is also dedicated to him.)

The cycle begins with Zechariah in the Temple confronted by the angel – and surrounded by crowds of people, as in Luke’s account – but clearly both building and people are those of the late 15th century. Some of the figures are in fact portraits.



The very well-known Birth scene gives us a serene picture of a Florentine chamber, with the new mother receiving visitors and gifts, and being brought strengthening foods, while the baby is suckled by a wet-nurse.



Ghirlandaio also represented the scene in which Zechariah writes down the baby's name.



In 1799 William Blake was commissioned by his patron Thomas Butts to paint fifty scenes from the Bible. Blake used a mixture of water-soluble paints and glue on canvas, and owing to the fragility of the materials only about half the works have survived, but one is his visionary image of Gabriel appearing to Zechariah in the Temple.

