

Reflection: Saint Edmund the Martyr - 20th November 2020



Saint Edmund the Martyr (840-869) is a saint who typifies how a true Christian ought to respond to the pressure to conform to the world, even when that pressure is reinforced by violent threat. Saint Edmund truly and manfully walked the way of the Cross right unto the end. So here, I would like to read from the Life of Saint Edmund as we have it as retold by Saint Dunstan:



Edmund the Blessed, King of East Anglia, was wise and worthy, and exalted among the noble servants of the almighty God. He was humble and virtuous and remained so resolute that he would not turn to shameful vices, nor would he bend his morality in any way, but was ever-mindful of the true teaching: "If you are installed as a ruler, don't puff yourself up, but be among men just like one of them." He was charitable to poor folks and widows, just like a father, and with benevolence he guided his people always towards righteousness, and restrained the cruel, and lived happily in the true faith.

Saint Dunstan then talks about the invasion of the Danes in 869, in short, Ivar the Boneless, came raiding and defeated the Anglo-Saxons, persecuting the Christians with an especial fury. Eventually, coming to East Anglia, he sent a messenger and demanded that Edmund surrender himself to be a vassal to him.



When king Edmund summoned a certain bishop with whom he was most intimate, and deliberated with him how he should answer the fierce Ivar. The bishop was afraid because of this emergency, and he feared for the king's life, and counselled him that he thought that Edmund should submit to what Ivar asked of him. Then the king became silent, and looked at the ground, and then said to him at last : "Alas bishop, the poor people of this country are already shamefully afflicted. I would rather die fighting so that my people might continue to possess their native land." The bishop said: "Alas beloved king, your people lie slain. You do not have the troops that you may fight, and the pirates come and kidnap the living. Save your life by flight, or save yourself by submitting to him." Then said king Edmund, since he was completely brave: "This I heartily wish and desire, that I not be the only survivor after my beloved thegns are slain in their beds with their children and wives by these pirates. It was never my way to flee. I would rather die for my country if I need to. Almighty God knows that I will not ever turn from worship of Him, nor from love of His truth. If I die, I live."



fter these words he turned to the messenger who Ivar had sent him, and, undaunted, said to him: "In truth you deserve to be slain now, but I will not defile my clean hands with your vile blood, because I follow Christ who so instructed us by his example; and I happily will be slain by you if God so ordain it. Go now quickly and tell your fierce lord: 'Never in this life will Edmund submit to Ivar the heathen war-leader, unless he submit first to the belief in the Saviour Christ which exists in this country.'" ...



ing Edmund, against whom Ivar advanced, stood inside his hall, and mindful of the Saviour, threw out his weapons. He wanted to match the example of Christ, who forbade Peter to win the cruel Jews with weapons. Lo! the impious one then bound Edmund and insulted him ignominiously, and beat him with rods, and afterwards led the devout king to a firm living tree, and tied him there with strong bonds, and beat him with whips. In between the whip lashes, Edmund called out with true belief in the Saviour Christ. Because of his belief, because he called to Christ to aid him, the heathens became furiously angry. They then shot spears at him, as if it was a game, until he was entirely covered with their missiles, like the bristles of a hedgehog (just like St. Sebastian was). When Ivar the impious pirate saw that the noble king would not forsake Christ, but with resolute faith called after Him, he ordered Edmund beheaded, and the heathens did so. While Edmund still called out to Christ, the heathen dragged the holy man to his death, and with one stroke struck off his head, and his soul journeyed happily to Christ. There was a man near at hand, kept hidden by God, who heard all this, and told of it afterward, just as we have told it here.



aint Edmund, became massively popular amongst both the English and also the Scandinavians, his cult reaching to France and Italy. No doubt his example and prayers, as the first Patron Saint of England, won the conversion of the Danes, who had to pay him due respect for not being a coward and for not running away from the death that he was called to die. Eventually, in 1020, the King Canute of Denmark and England built the Abbey of Bury Saint Edmunds over his shrine. Even after the 1066 invasion, the Normans, of Viking heritage themselves, did not wipe out the memory of Saint Edmund, but they too, in fact, celebrated and bolstered his cult. In walking the way of the Cross, in his great trust and faith in Christ, Edmund became a highly effective evangeliser of England after his martyrdom, influencing the imaginations of the savage Norsemen.



dmund was, like all martyrs, a witness first by his manner of life, and his death crowned that testimony. So likewise, we must be martyrs in our lives. God may not call us to such a death, but we must remember our responsibilities in this life to do good and to help where we can build Christ's kingdom, never running away from the difficulty of that call to take up our cross and follow. *Saint Edmund the Martyr, pray for us!*