

*A sermon preached by The Reverend Canon Dr. David J. Anderson on the Commemoration of Alfred the Great, King of the West Saxons, 899, October 26, 2022, at St. Jude's Church, Oakville. (Ferial Readings: Ephesian 6:1-9; Psalm 145:10-19; Luke 13:22-30)*

I speak to you in the name of The Most Holy and Blessed Trinity. Amen.

Today is a commemoration of the life of a West Saxon King of the ninth century, Alfred the Great. I begin with a few facts about Alfred.

Alfred the Great is a hero of English history because of his military and political victories — and a hero of the Church because of his efforts to build what was considered to be a Christian nation.

In the year 871, at the age of twenty-two, he unexpectedly became the king of the West Saxons after the death of his three older brothers in military campaigns and was immediately caught in a desperate seven-year struggle against the Danes who had overrun all the rest of England. The West Saxons emerged victorious, and Alfred spent the next twenty years of his life and reign struggling to win the peace. He sought to reconstruct the political life and institutions of his kingdom. He was a wise administrator, organizing his finances and the service due from his noble followers. He scrutinized the administration of justice and took steps to ensure the protection of the weak from oppression by ignorant or corrupt judges. He promulgated an important code of laws, after studying the principles of lawgiving in the Book of Exodus and the codes of Aethelbert of Kent and others, again with special attention to the protection of the weak and dependent.

Alfred is most exceptional, however, not for his generalship or his administration but for his attitude toward learning. He shared the contemporary view that the Viking raids were a divine punishment for the people's sins, and he attributed these to the decline of learning, for it was thought that only through learning could people acquire wisdom and live in accordance with God's will. Hence, in the lull from attack from the Danes, he invited scholars to his court from Mercia, Wales, and the European continent. He learned Latin himself and began to translate Latin books into English in 887. He directed that all young freemen of adequate means must learn to read English, and, by his own translations and those of his helpers, he made available English versions of "those books most necessary for all men to know," books that would lead them to wisdom and virtue. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, by the English historian Bede, and other writings which he believed revealed the divine purpose in history. Alfred's translation of the *Pastoral Care of St. Gregory I*, the great 6th-century pope, provided a manual for priests in the instruction of their flocks. Alfred's rendering of the *Soliloquies* of the 5th-century theologian St. Augustine of Hippo, to which he added material from other works of the Fathers of the Church, discussed problems concerning faith and reason and the nature of eternal life. His reign also saw activity in building and in art, and foreign craftsmen were attracted to his court.

Alfred the Great was, in short, considered to be the pattern of a Christian king, one whose prowess in war was matched and finally overshadowed by his wisdom in the works of peace.

So that is Alfred the Great, King of the West Saxons, who is commemorated on this day, the anniversary of his death in the year 899.

Let's turn our attention to today's Gospel Reading, which begins with Luke helpfully reminding us of the context. "Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem" (v.22). The reminder of the context helpful to us as we pick up the action somewhat in the middle of the story this morning. The journey to Jerusalem began way back in chapter 9, and section continues right through to chapter 19, and here we are, this morning, in chapter 13. It is good that Luke reminds us where we are; the place in the bigger story is important to remember, because the words of Jesus within this section carry a similar gravity and urgency. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and all that awaits him there. And in this section, one of the major issues that Luke is dealing with is the question that he wants us all to consider as readers as we follow Jesus in this journey: what does it mean *for us* to be followers of this Jesus?

So, it is in this context that someone from the crowd asks a question that any of us might have asked had we been reading along up to this point, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" (v.23). This question provides Luke with the opportunity to summarize some of the demands of discipleship.

Jesus' saying is somewhat complicated. He begins by speaking about the narrow door by which one must enter. "Strive to enter through the narrow door;" Jesus says, "for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able" (v.24). Jesus seems to be speaking to the necessity of discipline in order to enter.

However, in the very next verse, *the door* conveys a very different message. Here it is a closed door, an image describing that moment in the future when the time of opportunity is ended (vv. 25-27; cf. Mt 25:1-13).

The next shift of thought is that of a large ingathering into the kingdom—presumably from a time that the door was open—a gathering consisting of the faithful in Israel and of others from all over the world. Finally, we have another saying of Jesus that is often found at the close of collections of his teachings. Jesus says, "Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last" (v.30).

So what are we to make of all of this. Perhaps it helps to remember that the question to Jesus is this: "Will only a few be saved?" Jesus answers by saying that the invitation is open but the way into the kingdom is narrow and demands more than casual interest. And, in fact, the door of opportunity will not remain forever open. God's purpose moves toward a time of fulfillment in God's future when people from all over the world will have been welcomed, but a time when the door is finally closed. The door will certainly not be reopened for persons whose only claim is that Jesus once visited their town or preached in their streets or that they once saw Jesus in a crowd or knew members of his family. These appeals are not only futile but also self-incriminating because their opportunities carried obligations. ("To whom much is given.") And added to the pain of sitting before a closed door will be the sight of large numbers who are admitted, not only the expected ones among Israel's ancient faithful—Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets—but also the unexpected Gentiles who heard and believed. The point of the summary, however, is to emphasize that the door is presently open. Salvation is at hand. The invitation is to enter in.

For those who have been following this story, Luke's little summary provides with the opportunity to consider where we stand in relation to the kingdom of God. On what side of the door do we stand? Are we merely casual bystanders on the outside looking in? Or are we seekers who enter in to participate and share in God's reign? That is the question Jesus poses us this morning as we are invited to share in this Eucharistic feast.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.