

St. Martin

Soldier, Hermit, Pastor

A Presentation for St. Martin's Day 2011

by Rodney Wetherell & Ewen Tyler

RW: This presentation for St. Martin's Day has been sparked by reading this book, 'Martin of Tours' by Christopher Donaldson, which has been in our parish library for years. It's so interesting I wish I had read it a long time ago. One conclusion I have come to is that if St. Martin were to walk down the aisle right now, we would not like him very much. He would look wild and woolly, with matted hair and wearing a slave's robe. He would probably denounce us all as luxury-loving materialists. If he thought our church looked more pagan than Christian, he would burn it down on the spot. He might not want to talk to us, going instead into intense solitary prayer, and would seek out the company of the mentally ill. If he chose to preach, we might not be impressed – no one claimed he was a great preacher. Despite all this, Martin was tremendously famous in his lifetime, and even more so after he died, not only in France but throughout Europe. There is a particular connection with the English church. For today I have chosen some passages about St. Martin, either from Donaldson or other sources, to be read by parishioners. Some of the stories are so well attested they must be true, while others are aspects of the legend of St. Martin.

Named after Mars the god of war, Martin was the son of a military tribune in the Roman army. The Emperor Constantine had declared Christianity the state religion in 312, four years before Martin was born, but Martin's father was not sympathetic to Christianity, and was determined that Martin should join the army. He seems to have dobbed Martin in with the recruiting officer, who arrived with manacles to take Martin away for military service at the age of fifteen. He then entered several years of rigorous training, and remained in the army for many years – though was baptised along the way. Martin was attracted to Christianity from an early age, and there was a well-established church in Ticinum in northern Italy where his father had been posted. As a child he went to it often. Here is a passage from the first biography of St. Martin, by his disciple Sulpicius:

Ann Baker: When Martin was only ten years old, he took himself, against the wish of his parents, to the Church, and begged that he might become a catechumen. Soon afterwards, becoming in a wonderful manner completely devoted to God, when he was twelve years old, he desired to enter on the life of the hermit; and he would have followed up that desire with the necessary vows, had not his youthful age prevented it.

Martin was by natural inclination a hermit, and returned again and again to this way of life throughout his life. I have never heard of anyone else struck by this urge at the age of twelve, have you? He was conscripted into the Roman Army, as we've heard, and wanted to get out of it in order to give his life to Christ – but meanwhile he did what soldiers do, it seems. He is not described as a pacifist. Mind you, the Roman Army was not like a modern army. Wherever it went,

the army built roads and bridges as well as temples to the gods. As the son of a tribune, Martin had privileges like getting a double ration of food each day, and it's said that he made do with only one servant. In the army Martin had the time to prepare himself for baptism, and to begin carrying out his chosen vocation.

Wu Lan: Martin helped those who were in trouble, by giving assistance to the wretched, by supporting the needy, by clothing the naked, while he kept nothing for himself from his military pay except what was necessary for his daily needs. Far from being a mindless hearer of the Gospel, he followed it closely and took no thought for the morrow.

So Martin is in the army, travelling around the place, and at one stage his legion or whatever it was, was stationed in Amiens in Gaul or France. So let's get it out of the way, the only thing most of us know about St. Martin, that he cut his cloak in half for a beggar.

Tim Sherwood: In the middle of winter, a very severe winter which was proving fatal to many, Martin happened to meet at the gate of the city of Amiens a poor man who was nearly naked. He was entreating those that passed by to have compassion on him, but all passed the wretched man without notice, when Martin recognized that the man had been left to him. He had nothing except the cloak on his back, so taking his sword, he divided his cloak into two equal parts, and gave one part to the poor man. On this, some of the bystanders laughed, because Martin now stood out as only partly dressed. Many, however, groaned deeply because they themselves had done nothing similar.

That night, when Martin retired to sleep, he had a vision of Christ wearing that part of his cloak which he had given to the poor man. He heard Jesus say clearly to the multitude of angels standing round: 'Martin, who is still only a catechumen, clothed me with this robe.'

There are two representations of Martin and the beggar in this church, one being in the window by Stanley Kuszbecki, with a rather fierce-looking Martin and an old beggar; the other is in this painting by el Greco, owned by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, where the other man is young and healthy – of course it's Jesus, whom Martin sees in the beggar on the night of the meeting. In both cases Martin's armour belongs to the Renaissance period rather than the Roman.

Martin was discharged from the army when he was about forty. He had been a baptised Christian for years, and living a life of compassion, but now he was at last free to follow his Christian vocation. Martin went first to Poitiers where Hilary or Hilaire was the first bishop, and he became a mentor for Martin. Eventually he set out on a very long walk alone, with full armour and carrying camping equipment, in the middle of winter. He walked sixteen miles a day through France, over the snow-bound Alps and into Italy, arriving at the city which became Milan. The whole area was in a state of turmoil, but we pass over all that. Martin collected a companion with similar ideas and started walking back towards Poitiers along the coast. They ended up on the deserted island of Gallinaria and stayed for two years, living on roots and dates, and this is where Martin became a true hermit. Then he returned to Poitiers and Bishop Hilary, and another ten years passed, with

Martin continuing partly as a hermit but also doing pastoral work. He is credited with two miracles in this period, restoring two people who had died, or apparently died, to life, and these put him on the map well and truly. As a healer and a man with saintly potential, Martin became what we would call a celebrity – there were no movie stars or football heroes in those days. When the old Bishop of Tours died, a large delegation from that city came to Martin's hermitage near Poitiers, walking about a hundred miles, to demand that he come to Tours as their bishop. He hid from them, but according to legend, his hiding place was given away by the cackling of geese, and Martin did become Bishop of Tours in the year 371. Donaldson goes on:

Ann Baker: The people of Tours were to learn very quickly that they had found for themselves a very unusual bishop. They had become used to the idea of the bishop being a man involved in their daily affairs, and the numbers of people seeking private audience with Martin grew until he could stand it no more. Everything in Martin revolted at the idea of the bishop as an administrator or chief executive of a growing church bureaucracy; he was determined to rediscover the old style of spiritual leadership. Apparently with no warning, Martin moved from the bishop's residence in Tours out of the city altogether. He walked out to the caves that dot the cliff face on the south bank of the River Loire, and having come to a large flat meadow between the river and the cliffs he set about building for himself a small wooden hut at the foot of the highest cliff face. It was to be his home for the rest of his life – Marmoutier – and there he spent as time much as possible in solitary prayer.

Marmoutier was associated with Martin for the rest of his life and beyond it. The hut at the bottom of the cliff was his real home, though he went into Tours and around his diocese frequently. At Marmoutier he prayed and meditated alone, but people kept coming to see him, and dozens of would-be hermits also moved there. Martin would talk to them all in a group from time to time, and it became a loosely organized monastery. Though he did not draw up a Rule as Benedict did much later, he was one of the founders of the great monastic movement which enabled Christianity to survive through the dark ages to come. What drew Martin out of his solitude? It was above all his people, especially the sick in body and mind. He engaged with them in various ways, but centrally in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Rev. Sam Goodes: The basis of all solitary prayer, however, was for Martin the Eucharist through which he had first been drawn to Christianity. The Eucharist had taught Martin and all his fellow hermits the power of intercession, as they grew in understanding of the divine charity. One of the dangers of the hermit's life is absorption in his own spiritual affairs to the exclusion of the cries of fellow human beings for help. Each Sunday Martin was brought face to face with cries of the people of Tours in their various plights, and especially of the sick and crazy as they were brought to take their place in the church porch.

And Martin's healing continued throughout his ministry. Soon after he became Bishop of Tours, he was called to the house of an important man whose son had been bitten by a snake. He ran his hands all over the child's body and found the wound, then squeezed hard to make the poison shoot out. Donaldson is at pains to show that Martin did not heal through magic tricks, but by

practical means, as well as prayer. But here Donaldson tells us what is believed to be Martin's confirmation of his healing ministry.

Kay Beaumont: One day Martin was leaving a first floor room when he missed his footing, tripped over an uneven tread, and fell headlong down a flight of stairs. Seriously bruised, he was picked up and laid on his bed, where for some time he suffered great pain, until at last he dozed off to sleep. In the night he dreamt that an angel appeared, washed his wounds and applied healing ointment to his bruises; and the next day he woke greatly refreshed. Martin's dreams do much to reveal his inner conflicts and motivations, and this one show how he had come to see that Christian ministry of both angels and men as specifically one of healing. His prayer and study of the scriptures had taught him that the bishop in the church was above all one committed to the healing of men's minds and bodies.

There are so many aspects to Martin's ministry: his years in the army, his life as a hermit, fostering the idea of monasticism, his healing work, his Celtic spirituality, but there are several more of note. He can also be credited with pioneering the parish system.

Before Martin's time, Christians were largely confined to cities, where most bishops and priests lived. His method was to go to a remote region and travel from house to house speaking to people about God. Then he organized the converts into a community under the direction of a priest or monk. To let them know of his continued love and to keep them following the Christian way, he would visit these new communities at least once a year, traveling by boat, by donkey, or by foot. This crude parochial system became the key to establishing and maintaining the faith of newly-converted rural Christians. He was one of the first bishops to insist on visiting each of his parishes every year, no matter how remote.

Martin is said to be the patron saint of reformed alcoholics, of beggars, of horses and horsemen, geese, tailors, winemakers, soldiers and conscientious objectors both, and of the nation of France. Martin Luther was named after him, and he was a bit Protestant in his attitude to church hierarchies and power games. He defended some men sentenced to execution for heresy – but by the same token or the opposite one, he burned down pagan temples wherever he found them around Tours. This was a most complex and contradictory man – and he lived at an extraordinary time. After Constantine proclaimed Christianity as the state religion in 312, the church grew quickly as the Roman Empire declined, but as it grew it became subject to the corruption of power. Moreover the Goths and the Vandals were at the gate, or pouring over the Alps, and Rome was sacked in 410. Both the Empire and the Church were destroyed – at least, their buildings and institutions were largely wrecked. The Christian faith was kept alive only by monks and nuns who built monasteries, however primitive, and retired to them for the long period of darkness. The window of relative peace and stability when the Church grew, without major persecution, and Martin lived, was quite a short one, of about a century. I think we could say he made the most of his opportunities, and was one of the great ones of the early church.

Now Ewen Tyler is going to talk about the spreading of the cult of St. Martin through Europe.

The Cult of St. Martin

by Ewen Tyler

The cult of St. Martin as a saint and healer began well within his lifetime, but grew enormously after his death in 397. The first clue to this is the tussle that developed over his body, the moment he died. He was 81 and in poor health, travelling around his diocese, when it happened. In those days the possession of a saint's remains could be of great benefit to a town, and two claimed Martin: Tours and Poitiers where he had spent many years. Groups of men from both places arrived to claim the body, but during the night, while the Poitiers men were asleep, the men of Tours passed the body out the window, and placed it in a barge going up the Loire River to their own town where it stayed. A great abbey was built at Marmoutier, and a basilica in Tours, though both were destroyed and rebuilt several times over the centuries. The abbey did not survive the French Revolution, but the basilica was rebuilt most recently from 1886. Thus it is younger than St. Martin's Hawksburn which was built in 1883. The basilica was not finished till 1924.

St. Martin's cloak, or rather half of it, was venerated throughout the Middle Ages, and kept in Marmoutier Abbey. It was carried by the Frankish Kings everywhere they went, even into battle, and was credited with winning victories for them. Having been a soldier, Martin was very popular among soldiers, and royal households who went to war. He was credited with making wine, which led to his being considered a patron of drinking, pub keepers, parties and reformed alcoholics.

St Martin's day, or Martinmass, on November 11th, whilst first celebrated in France, spread to Germany in the 16th century, and later to the rest of Europe. It is always celebrated 8 days after All Souls day, and coincides with the European harvest time. The crops have been gathered in, work in the fields is over, the new wine is ready for drinking, and it is a time for partying. In the beginning on St. Martin's eve, there was always a great celebration followed by fasting for "the forty days of St. Martin", what we would now recognise as an early Advent.

In much of Europe, Martinmass is still a time for children. In Austria, Belgium, Germany and Holland, children go through the streets with lanterns and candles, sometimes preceded by a man on a horse. In some places, children get gifts. Bonfires are often lit and there is much feasting.

In Estonia it is also seen as the end of the All Souls octave, and ancestral souls are remembered. The children disguise themselves as men, and visit houses singing songs and telling jokes, and hope to be fed sweetmeats.

Feasting, and the eating of a goose – a symbol of St. Martin – is very common. In Croatia and Slovenia the new wine is considered sinful until it is baptised by someone dressed up as a bishop. In Malta children are given bags of nuts and dried figs, and some fresh fruit, known as the "St. Martin's bag"

In Poland and parts of Germany, croissants, shaped like horses hooves, are to remind them that St. Martin had been a cavalry man, and also perhaps as a symbol of half his cloak.

Spain and Switzerland would slaughter pigs for the winter and feasting, whilst in England it was beef which was killed and salted for the winter. No doubt following the Conquistadores, St. Martin has a popular following in Latin America.

The notion of feasting and partying to honour St. Martin, goes back many centuries – it is seen as a time for children and family. It seems to have a connection with All Souls Day and Halloween parties. Perhaps one year we should barbecue a pig at St. Martin's as a part of our celebration, following the Spanish tradition.

There are four cathedrals in Europe dedicated to St. Martin, apart from the basilica at Tours: Lucca in Italy, Utrecht in Holland, Mainz in Germany, and Bratislava in Slovakia. One of the oldest churches in Britain is St. Martin's Canterbury, part of it dating from Roman times, but the most famous is of course St. Martin-in-the-Fields. The largest Catholic church in Asia is St. Martin of Tours Basilica in Taal, in the Philippines, dating from the 16th century. Several major Episcopal churches in the USA are dedicated to St. Martin, of which the largest seems to be in Houston Texas. In Australia there are relatively few. In Sydney there is St. Martin's Anglican church, Killara, which describes itself as 'neither high nor low church'. In Melbourne the largest church dedicated to our saint is St. Martin of Tours Roman Catholic church, Rosanna-Macleod. In the Anglican Church there is one at Belgrave Heights, but St. Martin's Deepdene closed a few years ago.

Now Sam is going to close with a prayer attributed to Martin:

Rev. Sam Goodes: Lord, if Your people still have need of my services, I will not avoid the toil.

Your will be done.

I have fought the good fight long enough.

Yet if You bid me continue to hold the battle line in defence of Your camp,

I will never beg to be excused through failing strength.

I will do the work You entrust to me.

While You command, I will fight beneath Your banner.