

## Alfred the Great

I do sometimes wonder, when I look through the calendar of Holy Days at the beginning of my copy of Common Worship, why this or that person was included. Alfred the Great, listed for 26 October is one such. Why was he chosen? He is not, after all, one of our royal saints. Yet there he is, in roman type, signalling that this is a Lesser Feast, one up in the hierarchy from Commemorations, which are printed in italics. The date – as with saints – is the date of his death in 899.

King Alfred ruled Wessex, one of several kingdoms in an England that was not then unified, from 871 to 899, at a time when England was being ravaged by pagan Viking invasions. Only Wessex held out, resulting in the Treaty of Wedmore in 878. This established a demarcation line across the country, running roughly from London to Chester, north of which Viking power held sway, leaving an expanded Wessex to rule to the south. Alfred gets his epithet 'the Great' from this resistance, which involved considerable organisation of the army, fortified garrisons across Wessex, and the creation of a rudimentary naval force. But in terms of politics and practicalities, the crucial outcome was that Alfred maintained a Christian kingdom within England. So he was 'Alfred the Great' not just because he was a successful king in military terms, but also because his actions meant that Christian faith and culture were preserved in a substantial part of the country and did not succumb to pagan attack. Indeed, the principal Viking leader, Guthrum, with whom the Treaty of Wedmore was made, was obliged, as part of the treaty, to be baptised as a Christian.

However, there was yet more to Alfred's support of Christianity than this since, alongside his physical protection of his people, he also set about stimulating their moral and religious regeneration, responding to the common belief of the time that defeat of Christians by a pagan foe was the result of backsliding by the Christians, leading to God withdrawing his favour. Like all good leaders, Alfred knew how to draw upon the expertise of others and so, in order to carry out his aims, he brought together Asser from Wales, John from continental Saxony, Grimbold from St Bertin in northern France, and English scholars from outside the confines of Wessex, and with their help encouraged the production of works which would aid the revival of Christian learning. His decision to translate key works from Latin into English for this purpose was a radical departure from the norm, the idea being that it would make the subject-matter more widely accessible, although of course he recognised that those entering the church would need to learn Latin. At the outset, he enlisted the support of the bishops, sending to them copies of a translation of Gregory the Great's Pastoral Care, a work which sets out the responsibilities of bishops to teach and to preach. Other works associated with this programme were Boethius' On the Consolation of Philosophy (a work of central importance throughout the Middle Ages), a modified theological treatise by St Augustine, a translation of the first fifty Psalms, a history of the world by Orosius, an English version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History, and the saintly tales of Gregory's Dialogues.

It is for this that we honour Alfred the Great, a king who consciously set out to exercise his duties as a Christian leader through wisdom as well as war.

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