Choral Eucharist and Commissioning of
the Revd Dr Christopher Landau as Honorary Cathedral Chaplain

St Alphege, Archbishop of Canterbury, Martyr, 1012
Isaiah 43: 1–7; Matthew 16: 24–26
The Revd Canon Sarah Foot, Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it (Matt 16: 25)

The church commemorates today the martyrdom of Ælfheah, or Alphege, whose death on this day in the year 1012 sent shockwaves through contemporary Europe. Alphege was a saint of a rare kind in early Christian England. Although the Anglo-Saxons still remembered the British martyr, Alban, who died during the Roman persecutions of the third century, the process of their own conversion involved no deaths among the clergy who brought the good news of Christ’s gospel. No one died to make the warrior pagan Anglo-Saxon people into a Christian, English nation. This has always struck me as remarkable. Elsewhere in the western and eastern churches many men and women died as martyrs under pagan Roman rule, and in hostile mission fields. Some English kings killed by pagans later acquired the epithet martyr. Missionaries of English extraction were martyred in their attempts to preach to the Germans in the eighth century, among them, most famously, St Boniface.

But before Alphege, no Anglo-Saxon priest or bishop in England had found himself required to follow Christ’s injunctions literally and take up his cross to die for His sake. That does not mean, of course, that the early English church had no tradition of promoting the spiritual merits of suffering for Christ’s sake, nor that its priests did not find themselves in circumstances in which they would have had cause to seek comfort in the words of the prophet Isaiah that God would walk with them through water and fire. ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name you are mine.’ Some of the original missionaries to Northumbria had to flee for their lives after the death of the first Christian king, Edwin, in 633, when his realm reverted to paganism. Yet the one
cleric who stayed behind, James the Deacon, lived to an old age, unharmed by his pagan neighbours.

How did Alphege come to endure such a fate? After a career at Bath abbey and then as bishop of Winchester, Alphege became archbishop of Canterbury in 1006, at the height of King Æthelred the Unready’s wars against the Danes. The city of Canterbury was besieged by a Danish army in the autumn of 1011, captured, set on fire, and sacked. The cathedral church of Christ was pillaged and burned, and the archbishop taken prisoner.

For seven months, he languished in captivity in London, while the English tried to accumulate a huge tribute to pay off the Danes. As the invading army assembled on Easter Eve in 1012 to collect their money, the archbishop’s fate remained unresolved. One Danish noble had offered to pay the sum the army had set on Alphege’s head, but the prelate refused to allow anyone to buy his life; in that act of selflessness, he hastened his own death. After a week of stalemate, the Danes, who had begun to find the archbishop’s pious pronouncements infuriating, became ‘drunk on wine from the south’ at the end of a meal; they began to pelt him with bones and ox-heads until one of them sunk his axe into the archbishop’s head. As his blood flowed on the ground, he died. Contemporary commentators immediately claimed him as a saint and martyr.

Alphege had taken to heart Christ’s message to his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me’. Losing his life for Christ’s sake, Alphege found eternal life in the company of the martyrs in heaven. By the sacrifice of his earthly life, Alphege gained the rewards of immortality. He did not flee from persecution; he refused to take the easier path of accepting the payment of money for his life, but willingly gave up his life for Christ’s sake, in order to enjoy the joys of life in heaven.

In the light of today’s challenging gospel passage, how might we understand Alphege as an example for our own times? It is hard to see this as the most auspicious of occasions on which to commission Christopher as one of our honorary Cathedral chaplains. We must hope that he need not be warned to avoid the canons when they have enjoyed ‘wine from the south’, least they start hurling the remnants of their dinner at him. More seriously, this is, of course, not the only point in Matthew’s gospel where Jesus warned about the difficulties of gospel ministry and described the characteristics of true discipleship in terms that are as unwelcome for us to hear as they were for the first apostles. He asserted unambiguously: a true disciple of the cross will always acknowledge
Jesus, will accept the cost of discipleship and will give preference to the gospel over the lures and attractions of worldly life. So which life will we choose? Are we worthy to be called disciples? Do we want to keep the comforts of our lives and so risk losing our souls, or are we ready to give up our lives for the gospel?

In those bleak April days after Easter almost exactly one thousand years ago, St Alphege lived up to his calling as a priest, chosen by God to offer gifts and sacrifice for sins, for his own sins, as well as for those of his people (Heb 5:1-4). Aware of the privilege of that calling, he rejected the gift of money offered for his life and elected – for love of Christ and love of his people – instead to give his life for Christ. In dying, he was born again to a living hope. We lack, most of us, the courage and inspiration of Alphege; but we can resolve to follow the essence of his message.

As we pray for Christopher as he takes up this new ministerial role in our midst, we pray that he and we may live each day by surrendering ourselves to Christ, offering our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice; that after we have been refreshed and nourished by sharing in this eucharistic feast we may be sent out in the power of the Spirit, to live and work to God’s praise and glory.