

Tuesday Reflection

Today, 12th May, the Church remembers St Pancras - a 14-year old Roman beheaded for refusing to pay homage to the self-proclaimed divinity of a Roman emperor in the 3rd century.

Mention St Pancras to people in this country and the vast majority will associate the name with a major London railway station. So how is it that this major railway terminal is named after him?

St Pancras Station is named after the area of London in which it is situated, and the area probably takes its name from the church of St Pancras. Now, just to confuse matters, there are two St Pancras churches in London; the St Pancras New Church opposite Euston Station, and the St Pancras Old Church, situated further north. The Old Church is reputed to have been built on one of the oldest Christian sites in England, dating back to the 4th century, although there is no archaeological evidence to support this, and it is unlikely that the church would have been originally associated with St Pancras.

So how and where does this martyred Roman teenager come into the story? Is he just one of those saints we have adopted in this country - St George being a prime example - or is there more to it?

Fast forward to 596/7, when Pope Gregory commissioned Augustine to go forth and evangelise the 'English' (Angles). He sent with him a relic of St Pancras and a martyrology recounting the life and death of the saint. We know that London was one of the first three major centres of Roman evangelisation (the others being Canterbury and Rochester), so it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the Roman missionaries alighted on the already extant place of worship which then became dedicated to St. Pancras.

St Pancras Old Church itself has an interesting history and links to the history of Catholicism in this country. St Pancras Old Church is reputed to have been the last church in the country where a Mass bell tolled, and St Pancras, together with Paddington Church, was the only graveyard in which Roman Catholics were permitted to be buried. Among the graves is that of one Johann Christian Bach, the youngest son of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Saint Pancras is celebrated as the protector of children, health and jobs, all of them so highly relevant to the extraordinary times in which we find ourselves today.

And if a modern Pope were to send an emissary to Britain from Rome, it is quite likely, given that there are hardly any flights, that he would arrive at St Pancras International Station!

Michael Townson.