

### Sermon for St. Margaret's patronal festival.

Whoever sat down to find readings for the commemoration of our Patron Saint of St. Margaret in Collier Street had a tricky task to accomplish. In the end, the choice seems to have been God's request in the mouth of the prophet Micah that his recalcitrant people should "Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." Never bad advice, and certainly something that St Margaret is reported to have done.

The Gospel is a little trickier, with a sideways reference to Jonah in the belly of the great fish sent to rescue him and help set him back on track to proclaim God's warning to the Ninevites, a prefiguration of Jesus' Resurrection. I guess that this internal reference points us to the story about Margaret being swallowed by an evil fiery beast and escaping from its innards on account of her cross irritating its digestive system. It's quite some legend, and it has grown over the centuries that Margaret's name has been revered, in order to reflect the purity, humility, selflessness, and courage of her Christian witness.

Margaret was born at the end of the third century in Antioch which is now in modern day Turkey. She was reported to have been the daughter of a pagan priest and learned about Jesus from her Christian nursemaid after her mother had died. Her father disowned her so she was adopted by the maid and her husband, growing up to become a shepherdess.

The local Roman prefect took a fancy to her and desired to have her for his own, but only on condition that she renounce her Christian faith. Margaret refused, and was punished for her insolence with torture and threats. She would not worship the man-made gods of the empire, so an attempt was made to burn her, but the flames left her miraculously untouched. She was then bound hand and foot and immersed in a cauldron of hot water, but this means of persuasion also failed, as her prayers unloosed her bonds and she remained unharmed.

Finally she was ordered to be beheaded. Arrogance and Greed do not like to be challenged, and her death was to be an example to others not to adopt this pernicious and subversive faith.

While in prison awaiting public execution, she was tempted to recant and live, but holding firm to her faith, Satan in the form of a slimy, scaly serpent failed to overcome her Christian conviction, hence the legend of the aforementioned swallowing and the irritation of the Cross.

Eventually she was beheaded by a penitent executioner who like some five thousand others was converted by her courageous and faithful example, rather than deterred by the prefect's hateful petulance and oppressive cruelty. Many who were sick, lame, or troubled were healed at her prayers and her presence among them.

Fantastic and fabulous these legends may be, not to mention factually apocryphal. But the popularity of St. Margaret did not arise on the back of a fairy tale, but on the truth of her witness.

This is a world where avarice and rapacity are considered to be virtues, where wealthy and influential people regularly oppress those who are poor and weak, where the man-made gods of wealth and status are widely worshipped, and where Satan is on every corner waiting to envelop the unwary Christian in the temptations of desire. Those who challenge the cult of self-fulfilment are routinely mocked; but for us, as for Margaret, the Cross is not just a means of irritation against evil. It is a means of Salvation from it. May Christ be ever at our side, as he was at hers.

Let us celebrate her memory, and look to her example in this and every age. Amen.