

## St Catherine of Alexandria

And so today we keep our patronal festival and remember St Catherine of Alexandria Christian convert and martyr. Catherine certainly took her faith seriously, by the little we know about her. If we go by tradition, her conversion wasn't taken too well in the pagan society she lived in, in Egypt in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> century. But Catherine not only held on to the faith she had converted to at around 14 after a vision of the Madonna and child; she also after denouncing the emperor, converted those who tried to convert her, pagan philosophers and other influential people, including some of the emperors own family.

Maximias the emperor was obviously not a happy man as he had Catherine tied to a wheel for torture, before it broke and then had the young Catherine beheaded. And so Catherine would join a long line of early Christian martyrs, who were prepared to die for their faith. Martyrs who were prepared to die for the love of the one, who loved them and died for them. Jesus Christ, whose kingship of another kind we celebrate today.

Here in New Brancepeth in County Durham, we might seem to be along way from Egypt and the great monastery of the same country named after her, where Catherine's relics were said to be kept. But the cult of St Catherine spread very rapidly both in the eastern church and in the west and she became very popular for instance in France and here in England in mediaeval times. Joan of Arc as she heard the voices of saints, claimed that St Catherine was one of them!

We are in some sense a long way from Catherine and her world. Catherine who believed she was married to Christ and no one else. A belief nonetheless that women in religious orders would relate to over the century's until this day. It would be good to be able to say that there are no more Christian martyrs; but we know that there are and this has been quite apparent in more recent times in lands not so far from where Catherine met her death.

It's probably true to say that most of us don't take the thought that dying for our faith is a possibility, very seriously. But we can like Catherine and countless other Christian's martyrs and otherwise before us, we can take our religion seriously. We can't claim to be persecuted as our fellow Christians are in other parts of the world; but we are up against something in what many would say is an increasingly secular society, where we're being a bit edged out. Some within our own society are quite hostile to the church, others more in a ridiculing sort of way. But there are very many who are nominally Christian and there is still a demand for church, with occasional offices, especially baptism and funerals, still being something many of the population and thus, many in our parish want. And here in New Brancepeth for instance, we still have a good influence in our school.

To them and others in our midst, we have the opportunity to show others there is a different way to the ways of the world. We are after all followers of the one whose 'kingdom' 'is not from here.' Yes as ordinary people we like and even love some of the ways of our world, whether they are good things or bad things. But if we're truthful many of the ways of this world are not good; whether on a global level, on a national level, whether on a community level, a family and social level perhaps, depending, and most certainly on a personal level. We are after all a part of the world and contribute to its ways!

But we can like Catherine of Alexandria, by the way we live our own lives and in the way in which we embrace our Christian faith, counter the ways of our fallen world, right down to the ways of our fallen lives. For all the good, God given things in life, it's also a tough life on different levels. But wherever we are on this scale, as Christians we can count on the love of Christ, whose 'kingdom is not from this world,' and whose followers did not fight to keep him 'from being handed over to the Jews.' We might not suffer persecution, or famine or the sword as St Paul says in the letter we heard to the Romans, but we may well at times suffer hardship and distress, and finding our way out of difficulty may be a struggle. For the Christian, denying ones self and taking up ones cross to follow Jesus may be a struggle. But along with the saints and martyrs of God's holy church, we are following a path trodden by Jesus, who was persecuted

and crucified for our sake. It's a path that leads us through challenges and temptations, as well as joy and liberation, because of one thing. The love of Christ!

'Who will separate us from the love of Christ?' Paul says. Because in all obstacles put before us, 'we are more than conquerors, through him who loved us.'

So like our patron Catherine and all the other saints and martyrs before us, we too can echo Paul and say.

'I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

That's a message we need to believe and the world needs to hear!

Amen