

Reflection Wednesday Easter Week 6 St John Stone 2021

St John Stone, an Augustinian Martyr, is a patron of the Assumptionists in England. Nothing is known of his early life but it is thought that he joined the Augustinians at Canterbury where he was born. He was a doctor of theology at the Augustinian friary there. During the quest for supporters for the contemplated divorce of Queen Catherine, Stone was approached by agents of the King seeking to win his influence and gain the weight of his opinion at the Council convoked at Canterbury; but he resolutely denounced the divorce as being contrary to the tenets of morality and justice. On 14th December 1538 the Bishop of Dover, Richard Yngworth, visited Canterbury to close the Augustinian friary. He found the Austin Friars to be in great poverty. *"Their debts were £40, and their implements not worth £6, except a little plate weighing 126 oz."* As each friar was expelled, he had to sign two documents: one acknowledging the king as supreme head of the church in England, and another declaring the surrender of their friary to be voluntary. Stone alone refused to sign, and spoke in clear terms of his objections to the king's claims over the Church. He was immediately separated from his confreres in order to forestall his influence over them and was urged with threats to alter his position. The visiting officers sent Stone to Thomas Cromwell in London. Cromwell failed to change Stone's mind and ordered him imprisoned in the Tower. In October 1539 he was sent back to Canterbury for trial and was tried for treason under the 1535 Treason Act, which declared that the penalty for high treason was death. No appeal was allowed. Usually such a sentence was carried out immediately but it was delayed because Anne of Cleves was coming to England to be the fourth wife of King Henry VIII and was due to arrive on Sunday, 7th December 1539, stopping at Canterbury overnight on her way to London. Her arrival was delayed by bad weather. Her visit and Stone's execution possibly happened on Saturday, 27th December 1539 but this date is disputed. It was timed to be part of the reception festivities arranged for Anne. The bill for the execution amounted to £15.9.11d (fifteen pounds, nine shillings and eleven pence — equivalent to £10,481 in 2019). This was a great sum when compared to a previous execution which had cost only six pence. The place of execution was not Holloway, the traditional site, but the most striking landmark of the city, the Dungeon, now called the Dane John, a prominent hillock near the present Canterbury East railway station. In the account books of Canterbury, there appears an expense of two shillings and six pence *"Paid for a half-ton of wood to build the gallows on which Friar Stone was brought to justice."* As a prisoner Stone was carried to a hill outside the city walls. He was not only hanged there but also drawn and quartered. For him being a traitor, his head and body were exhibited at the entrance to the city for everyone observing as a warning to other rebels.

"Behold I close my apostolate in my blood, in my death I shall find life, for I die for a holy cause, the defence of the Church of God, infallible and immaculate", Stone said as the executioners prepared to do their work. Stone was soon venerated as a martyr. Later in the century, Pope Gregory XIII sanctioned a painting in the English College at Rome depicting Stone as martyr, and likewise permitted an engraving of him to be printed in 1584.

Stone's name was placed at the top of the list of martyrs of the English Reformation which was presented to Rome for the process of beatification. Stone was beatified by Pope Leo XIII on 9th December 1886 and canonised by Pope Paul VI on 25th October 1970 along with other 39 English martyrs. He is one of the Forty Martyrs chosen to represent Roman Catholics martyred in England and Wales between 1535 and 1679. John Stone is also patron saint of the University of Kent Catholic Society. St John Stone, pray for us.