

HOLY RELICS AT CHRISTMINSTER

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Among the treasures of Christminster we are happy to number a large collection of holy relics, of saints, holy things and holy places. The Church has from the very earliest times venerated the relics of her saints and martyrs, as well as of certain holy objects such as the True Cross and other instruments of the Passion. Such objects provide us with a tangible and material connection with the holiness from which they derive.

There are those who fail to understand this veneration of holy things, treating it as a pious superstition or pagan survival. But it is perfectly akin to the Church's sacramental view of nature: mere material things – like the Sacraments themselves – can become bearers of holy mysteries. God created physical and material nature and did not think it beneath him to take upon himself a mortal body of flesh and blood, a body that ate and drank and sweated and slept like any other mortal body. And because of what he was and what he did that mortal flesh became the bearer and instrument of immortality.

In a lesser, but similar, way, holy relics show forth the realism of God's creation. Their purpose, like that of holy icons, is to draw us nearer to the holiness they partly signify and partly contain. Thus we honor and venerate them in the same manner as we venerate icons.

Among the relics here at Christminster are relics of the Lord's Passion, of the Mother of God, of various saints and of certain holy places.

Among the relics of the Passion, which we specially venerate on Good Friday after the Presanctified Liturgy, are a relic of the True Cross and one of the Crown of thorns – the latter, examined closely, being scarcely larger than a baby's eyelash.

Perhaps most unusual of our relics – and certainly the rarest – are those of the holy Mother of God. These include a small piece of her veil, a hair from her head, and a small stone from her house in Ephesus. The veil relic is from Rome; the hair relic was handed on to us by Dom Augustine Whitfield, having been in the possession of the Monastery of Mount Royal for some time; and the stone was brought to us by a pilgrim to the holy house.

Relics of holy things and holy places include a leaf from Abraham's oak at Mamre, the small tree seen in the background of the famous icon by St. Andrei Rublev of the three angels seated at Abraham's table and signifying the Holy Trinity. We have also a leaf from the tree alleged to be that which Zacchaeus climbed to see our Lord. There are also small stones, one from the garden of Gethsemani and another from Mount Athos.

We once had from Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai a cutting from the burning bush of Moses which still grows there. Regrettably it did not prosper with us.

Relics of St. John Maximovitch include a piece of his monastic habit, a hair from his head, and his monastic skull cap (skoufia). We treasure these as he is one of the patrons, along with St. Tikhon, of western-rite Orthodoxy. Of St. Tikhon we have a couple of strands from his prayers rope – the rope itself being in the possession of Dom Augustine at Mount Royal.

More a curiosity than a relic – but of interest for its connection with ancient Glastonbury – is the gift sent to us some years ago by Fr. Paul Schneirla, Vicar of the Antiochian western rite. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Church of England authorized Frederick Bligh Bond to do some archeological excavations and explorations at Glastonbury Abbey. Among items he discovered was the medieval seal of Saint Dunstan, once abbot of Glastonbury. Several wax impressions of the seal were made, one of them given to Fr. Schneirla, who passed it on to us here at the Church of Our Lady of Glastonbury. We also have a leaf plucked from the Holy Thorn bush at Glastonbury.

Of Benedictine saints we have two relics of Saint Benedict, and relics of St. Gregory the Great, St. Scholastica, and Sts. Maurus and Placid.

A number of the Apostles and Evangelists are also among our relics: Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, James, Peter, Paul, Jude, Thomas and Andrew. Other New Testament relics include Saints John the Baptist, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene, and Stephen the Protomartyr.

The remaining relics provide a small litany of the saints: John Chrysostom, Ignatius of Antioch, Cuthbert, Ambrose, Athanasius, Bede, Columba, Columban, Anne the Mother of the Theotokos, Augustine of Hippo, Augustine of Canterbury, Jerome, Nicholas, and Herman of Alaska.

Apart from honoring a particular relic on the feast associated with it, there is once a year a feast honoring all the relics at Christminster. This is always on the Saturday following the third Sunday after Easter. On the feast of Our Lady of Glastonbury and on other main feasts of the Mother of God, the three relics of her are publicly presented for veneration.

Visitors and pilgrims to Christminster are encouraged to request an opportunity to venerate any of these holy relics during their visit. We are especially blessed to have these tangible links to holy mysteries and to holy men and women, reminding us that we are a single link in the great chain of Christian believers throughout the ages

