

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Aldhelm of Sherborne

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: May 25

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IN BRIEF

Saint Aldhelm of Sherborne

Abbot of Malmesbury, first Bishop of Sherborne and Latin poet of the seventh century.

Feast day	May 25
Born	c. 640, Wessex, England
Died	709 or 710, Doulting, Somerset, England
Era	8th century
Patron saint of	musicians, composers

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Aldhelm for Musicians and Poets

Novena to Saint Aldhelm

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Aldhelm of Sherborne

Saint Aldhelm was an Anglo-Saxon monk of the seventh century, abbot of Malmesbury and then the first Bishop of Sherborne, in the kingdom of Wessex. A student of the school of Canterbury and a Latin poet and prose writer of astonishing skill, he is considered by historians to be "the first English man of letters." Tradition also makes him a musician who sang to draw crowds to the Gospel. He died in 709 or 710, and his feast day is May 25.

Who was Saint Aldhelm?

Aldhelm was born around 640 in Wessex, the kingdom of the West Saxons. His life is known mainly from two biographies written after the Norman Conquest, by Abbot Faritius of Abingdon and by the chronicler William of Malmesbury, who relied in part on a lost text by King Alfred the Great. According to these authors, he belonged to the royal family of Wessex, and his father may have been King Centwine. He may have received part of his education at the abbey of Iona, one of the great centers of Irish Christianity.

Wessex was then a young Christian kingdom: its king Cynegils had been baptized only a few years before Aldhelm's birth. Aldhelm belonged to the first generations of West Saxons raised in the faith, and he would spend his life deepening it among his people.

In the early 670s he went to Canterbury to study under Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus and Abbot Hadrian. There he discovered the close study of the Bible, Latin meter, the reckoning of the calendar and probably some Greek. This training made him one of the most learned minds of his century.



Malmesbury Abbey, where Aldhelm was abbot.

Key dates in the life of Saint Aldhelm

- **c. 640**: Born in the kingdom of Wessex.
- **Early 670s**: Studies under Theodore and Hadrian at Canterbury.
- **After 680**: Abbot of the monastery of Malmesbury.
- **688-689**: May have accompanied King Cædwalla on pilgrimage to Rome.
- **705 or 706**: First Bishop of Sherborne.
- **709 or 710**: Dies at Doulting, in Somerset.

Abbot of Malmesbury

The founding of Malmesbury is traditionally dated to 675, but the charter that gives this date is a twelfth-century forgery. Aldhelm probably became abbot only after 680. Under his leadership the monastery became a center of study and prayer.

William of Malmesbury tells a story that became famous. Seeing that the country people left church as soon as Mass was over, Aldhelm stood on a bridge dressed as a minstrel and sang poems in English. Once a crowd had gathered, he slipped words of Scripture into his songs. This story, handed down by tradition, explains why he is depicted as a monk with a harp and invoked by musicians.

First Bishop of Sherborne

In 705 or 706 the large diocese of the West Saxons was divided in two, Winchester and Sherborne, and Aldhelm became the first Bishop of Sherborne. Saint Bede the Venerable, who mentions him in his *Ecclesiastical History*, describes his time as bishop as energetic.

It was brief, however: in four years Aldhelm founded several churches, at Sherborne and perhaps at Bradford-on-Avon and Wareham. He died in 709 or 710 at Doulting, in Somerset. According to William of Malmesbury, his body was carried to Malmesbury, and crosses were set up along the way at each place where the funeral procession stopped.



Sherborne Abbey, heir to the episcopal see founded with Aldhelm.

An exceptional Latin writer

Aldhelm left only works in Latin, in a very recognizable style: long sentences, alliteration, rare and learned vocabulary. His treatise *On Virginity*, written first in prose and then in verse, is addressed to Abbess Hildelith and the nuns of Barking.

His long letter to King Aldfrith of Northumbria contains treatises on the number seven, on meter and on scansion, together with a collection of one hundred *Riddles* in verse, short puzzles in which an animal, a plant, a star or an everyday object describes itself and invites the reader to guess its name. Through these small poems he taught his students to look at creation with wonder and to see in it the work of the Creator. He also wrote poems meant to be inscribed in churches, and a verse account of a journey through Cornwall and Devon.

His influence was considerable. It can be traced in many Anglo-Saxon writers, from Saint Boniface, the apostle of Germany, to Alcuin, master of Charlemagne's palace school.

Why is Saint Aldhelm the patron saint of musicians?

Aldhelm is invoked as patron of musicians and composers because of the story of the bridge at Malmesbury: a monk who sang the people's own songs in their own language to bring them back to the Word of God. For him, study, poetry and song were paths to God.

As abbot and pastor, he sought to reach people where they were, even on a bridge, with their language and their love of music. He can be prayed to for musicians, poets, teachers and all who look for new words to speak the Gospel. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Aldhelm and the novena to Saint Aldhelm.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Aldhelm in art

Saint Aldhelm appears either as a monk or as a bishop with miter and crosier. Because of the Malmesbury story, he is often shown with a harp, as a monk-musician. A book recalls the scholar and the Latin poet. A stained glass window in St Aldhelm's Catholic Church in Malmesbury shows him as a bishop. In Dorset, a headland on the Purbeck coast bears his name, St Aldhelm's Head, crowned by a small medieval chapel.



Saint Aldhelm in a stained glass window at St Aldhelm's Church, Malmesbury.

Where to pray to Saint Aldhelm

- **Malmesbury, Wiltshire**: the abbey he led and where he was buried, and the Catholic church of St Aldhelm.
- **Sherborne, Dorset**: the abbey, heir to his episcopal see.
- **Doulting, Somerset**: the village where he died.

PRAYER

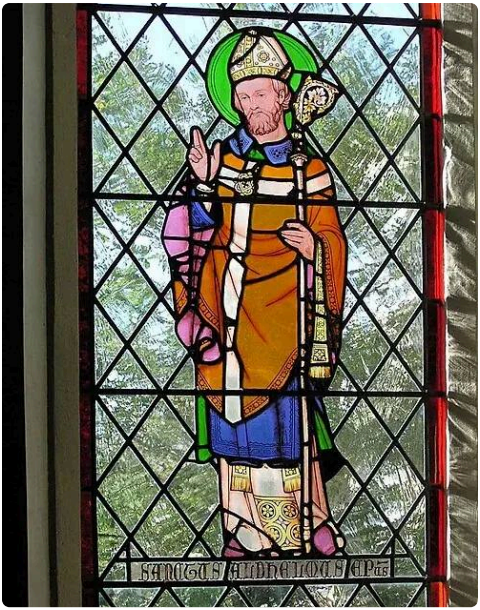
Prayer to Saint Aldhelm for Musicians and Poets

There is no widely used traditional prayer to Saint Aldhelm, and his learned Latin works do not lend themselves to short quotation. Yet a story handed down by William of Malmesbury sums up his spirit. You will find it below, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia for musicians, poets and teachers.

A story from his life to reflect on

Seeing that people left church as soon as Mass was over, Aldhelm is said to have stood on a bridge like a professional singer and sung them poems in their own language. When a crowd had gathered to listen, he gradually mixed words of Scripture into his songs, and many in this way came back to the faith.

Source: William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, Book V (twelfth century), who says he took the story from a lost book by King Alfred the Great. It is a tradition, not a contemporary account.



Saint Aldhelm in prayer.

Prayer to Saint Aldhelm for musicians and poets

Saint Aldhelm, you loved study, poetry and song, and made them paths to God: bless musicians, poets, writers and all who serve beauty.

You went out onto a bridge to find those who would not stay in church: teach us to meet people where they are, with their words and their songs, so that they may hear the Gospel.

You learned from great teachers and passed on in turn what you had received: pray for teachers, students and schools.

You led your monastery and your diocese with energy: support all who carry responsibility in the Church. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

May my life, like yours, become a song of praise to the Lord. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Aldhelm's feast day is May 25. This prayer is especially fitting:

- for musicians, composers, choir members and church music directors;
- for poets, writers and all who work with words;
- for teachers and students, especially before exams or at the start of a school year;
- for those who look for new ways to share the Gospel with people far from the Church.

You can also pray the novena to Saint Aldhelm from May 17 to 25, and read the life of Saint Aldhelm.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Aldhelm

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury and first Bishop of Sherborne. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, May 25, begin it on May 17. It can also be prayed at any time: before a concert or a recording, at the start of a school year, or when you are looking for the right words to speak of God.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. If you are a musician, you may also sing a hymn each day. The small act suggested for the day helps you live in Aldhelm's spirit of learning, beauty and mission.



Malmesbury Abbey, where Saint Aldhelm is buried.

Day 1: A child of Wessex

Aldhelm was born around 640 in Wessex, a kingdom that had only recently received the faith. He grew up among the first generations of Christians of his people. Each of us receives the faith in a particular place and time, and is called to make it grow there.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the place and the people through whom I received the faith. Help me to make it grow where I live.

Today: Pray for your town or region, and for the faith of its people.

Day 2: A student at Canterbury

Aldhelm traveled to Canterbury to learn from Theodore of Tarsus and Hadrian. He studied Scripture, Latin, the calendar and some Greek. To learn is a form of humility: it means accepting that others know more than we do.

Prayer: Lord, give me a teachable heart, eager to learn and grateful to those who teach me.

Today: Learn something new about your faith: a passage of Scripture, a prayer, the life of a saint.

Day 3: The love of words

Aldhelm loved language. His Latin is rich, playful, full of rare words and sound patterns. Words are a gift from God, and they can build up or tear down. Aldhelm used his to praise God and to teach.

Prayer: Lord, purify my speech. Let my words build up, console and give praise to you.

Today: Avoid one harsh or careless word, and speak one word of encouragement instead.

Day 4: The riddles of creation

In his hundred *Riddles*, Aldhelm lets the creatures of the world speak: animals, plants, stars, everyday objects. He invites us to look at creation with wonder, as a book in which God's wisdom can be read.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to the beauty of your creation, and let it lead me to praise you.

Today: Take a few minutes outside to look at one thing in creation slowly, and thank God for it.

Day 5: Abbot of Malmesbury

As abbot, Aldhelm made Malmesbury a place of prayer and study. A monastery is a school of the Lord's service, where the day is ordered by prayer. Every home can become, in its own way, a small school of prayer.

Prayer: Lord, make my home a place where you are welcomed and where prayer has its place.

Today: Set a fixed time for prayer in your day and keep it.

Day 6: The singer on the bridge

According to William of Malmesbury, Aldhelm stood on a bridge and sang poems in English to people who hurried out of church, then wove the words of Scripture into his songs. He did not wait for people to come to him: he went to them, in their language and with their music.

Prayer: Lord, give me the creativity and the courage to share your Gospel with those who are far from the Church.

Today: Share a hymn, a piece of sacred music or a verse of Scripture with someone.

Day 7: Music in the service of God

Aldhelm is invoked as patron of musicians and composers. Music can lift the heart to God and carry the Word deep into memory. Those who serve in choirs, at the organ or with instruments take part in the prayer of the Church.

Prayer: Lord, bless musicians, singers and composers. May their gifts give you glory and lead others to you.

Today: Thank a musician or choir member in your parish, or sing a hymn of praise.

Day 8: First Bishop of Sherborne

Late in life, Aldhelm became the first Bishop of Sherborne. In only four years he founded churches and governed his diocese with energy. It is never too late to serve, and the time we are given, however short, can bear much fruit.

Prayer: Lord, bless our bishop and our priests, and help me to use well the time you give me.

Today: Pray by name for your bishop, and offer a service to your parish.

Day 9: A life become a song

Aldhelm died at Doulting in 709 or 710. Tradition says crosses were raised along the road where his body was carried to Malmesbury. His whole life, with its study, poetry and pastoral care, had become a song of praise to God.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Aldhelm, make my life a song of praise to you, and hear the intention of this novena.

Today: Pray or sing the Gloria or a psalm of praise.

Closing prayer

Saint Aldhelm, monk, abbot, bishop and poet, you placed your learning, your words and your music at the service of the Gospel. Pray for musicians, poets, teachers and students, and for all who seek new ways to speak of God. Teach us to love beauty and to reach people where they are. I entrust to you the intention of this novena: (name it in silence). Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Aldhelm and the prayer to Saint Aldhelm.

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