St Martin of Tours • Prayer of the Month, November 2016

Lord, if your people still have need of my services,
I will not avoid the toil.
Your will be done.
I have fought the good fight long enough.
Yet if you bid me continue to hold the battle line in defence of your camp,
I will never beg to be excused from failing strength.
I will do the work you entrust to me.
While you command, I will fight beneath your banner.

<div align="right">St Martin of Tours, 316–397</div>

This is the prayer of someone who thinks like a soldier, of duty and obligation. Above all, he wants to be consistent and reliable. 'I have fought the good fight long enough', quoting from St Paul's second letter to Timothy 4.7, indicates a long battle, or a long life. However, he will not give up, for he still wants to do God's work, to do what God has called him to do. Faith does not fade.

Martin of Tours, was indeed a soldier, or a former soldier. He was born at Savaria, Pannonia (now Szombathely, Hungary). His father was a senior officer (tribune) in the Imperial Horse Guard, a unit of the Roman army, and was later stationed in northern Italy, where Martin grew up. At the age of ten Martin went to church against the wishes of his parents. He became a catechumen or candidate for baptism. When Martin was fifteen, as the son of a cavalry officer he was obliged to join the cavalry himself, which he did. Once, while he was stationed in Gaul (modern France), he experienced a vision. He was approaching the gates of the city of Amiens when he met a scantily clad beggar. He impulsively cut his own military cloak in half and shared it with the beggar. That night, Martin dreamed of Jesus wearing the half-cloak he had given away. He heard Jesus say to the angels: 'Here is Martin, the Roman soldier who is not baptized; he has clad me.' (Sulpicius, ch 2). The dream confirmed his faith and he was baptized at the age of eighteen. He served in the military for another two years until, just before a battle with the Gauls at Borbetomagus (now Worms, Germany) in 336, Martin determined that his faith prohibited him from fighting, saying, 'I am a soldier of Christ. I cannot fight.' He was charged with cowardice and jailed, but in response to the charge, he volunteered to go unarmed to the front of the troops. His superiors planned to take him up on the offer, but before they could, the invaders sued for peace, the battle never occurred, and Martin was released from military service.

He declared his vocation to serve the church, and made his way to Caesaridunum (now Tours), where he became a disciple of Hilary of Poitiers. When Hilary was forced into exile, for opposing Arianism, Martin went back to Italy. When Hilary returned fromr exile in 361, Martin joined him and established a monastery nearby, at the site that developed into the Benedictine Ligugé Abbey, the first in Gaul; it became a centre for the evangelization of the country districts. He travelled and preached through western Gaul. In 371 he was made bishop of Tours; he had pagan temples and statues destroyed and established a rudimentary parish system. The following year he set up the monastery of Marmoutier, which faces Tours from the other side of the Loire. He died at in Candes-Saint-Martin, Gaul (central France) in 397. His feast day is: 11 November.

<div align="right">Colin Lunt</div>