# QVÆSTIO INSVLARIS

*Selected Proceedings of
the Cambridge
Colloquium in
Anglo-Saxon,
Norse and Celtic*

Volume 8· 2007

The Power of Binding and Loosing: the Chains of Sin in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Liturgy

Helen Foxhall Forbes
Trinity College, Cambridge

> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.[1]

Peter's recognition of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, was rewarded with this promise of the keys to heaven, and the power of binding and loosing. This was interpreted as the power to forgive sins, which Jesus is recorded as giving explicitly to all his apostles elsewhere in the Bible: 'If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven'.[2] In line with other authors, the eighth-century historian Bede viewed this apostolic power as continuing through the Church:

> Necnon etiam nunc in episcopis ac presbyteris omni ecclesiae officium idem committitur ut uidelicet agnitis peccantium causis quoscumque humiles ac uere paenitentes aspexerit hos iam a timore perpetuae mortis miseras absoluat quos uero in peccatis quae egerint persistere cognouerit illos perennibus suppliciis obligandos insinuet.[3]

Bishops and priests, in their continuation of apostolic ministry and acting as God's representatives on earth, have the power to absolve sin. The importance of 'binding' and 'loosing' (Latin *ligo* and *solvo* respectively, in the Vulgate), however, is evident in that it could transform sin from an abstract concept into a more concrete reality, binding people down. Bede continues his homily with a discussion of the authority of the Church over sin, and referring just a few sentences later to the *uincula peccatorum* ('the chains of sin').[4] Bede's use of 'chains' here sounds metaphorical, but there are indications that the image of sin as chains was also viewed in a more literal, or even physical, manner.

A large number of saints' lives include miracle-stories which demonstrate the saint's power to absolve sins. Lantfred, the author of the *Vita* of St Swithun, records Swithun's healing of a paralysed man,[5] explaining that the man was diseased because of his sin, and that from Swithun he received medicine for both body and soul.[6] This connection is important, since it is by the confession of his sins that he was able to be cured, and the implication is that the health of the soul is intimately connected with the health of the body.[7] Saintly

---

[1] Mt. XVI.19. (This and all other English translations of the Bible are from The New International Version.)

[2] Jn. XX.23.

[3] Hom. I.20, ll. 171–6 (ed. D. Hurst, *Bedae Venerabilis Opera Homiletica*, CCSL 122, p. 146). 'Indeed even now the same office is committed to the whole Church in her bishops and priests, so that when she has come to know sinners'

cases, she considers which are humble and truly penitent, and in compassion she may then absolve them from the fear of perpetual death. But she may suggest that those whom she recognizes to be persisting in the sins which they have committed, should be assigned to everlasting punishments,' (transl. L. T. Martin and D. Hurst, *Homilies on the Gospels*, Cistercian Studies Series, no. 110–111 (Kalamazoo, MI., 1991), p. 203).

[4] Hom. I.20, ll. 185–6 (ed. Hurst, *Opera Homiletica*, pp. 146–7).

[5] Lantfred of Winchester, *Translatio et miraculi S. Swithuni* §3 (ed. and transl. M. Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, Winchester Studies 4.ii (Oxford, 2003), pp. 252–334, at pp. 274/5–286/7).

[6] *Ibid.*, §3, ll. 122–30 (ed. and transl. *ibid.*, pp. 282/3–284/5).

[7] K. O'Brien O'Keefe, 'Body and Law in Late Anglo-Saxon England', *ASE* 27 (1998), 209–32, at p. 220.

power of absolution is hardly surprising at one level: many saints, such as Swithun, were also bishops or priests, and therefore held this power as part of their office. However, the context here is not one of regular confession and absolution, but the manifestation of sin as sickness, or demonic possession, cleared by a saint's absolution of the victim's sin. Absolution effecting cure itself has biblical precedents,[8] but the imagery of chains which is often associated with this in medieval saints' lives does not.

Returning to St Swithun, Lantfred describes that a parricide came to Winchester, horribly bound up in chains. On praying to Swithun, these burst open, setting him free.[9] An even stronger manifestation of Swithun's power occurred when a thief imprisoned in Francia, who had only heard of the saint's reputation from travelling merchants, called upon him without even knowing his name: the thief's chains fell off, and the doors of the prison burst open.[10] In both of these cases, it is the saint's power to forgive sins which is significant, and which results in the loosing of both physical and metaphorical chains, held in place by the sins which these men had committed.

The case of the parricide is particularly interesting, since the wearing of chains was contemporary penitential practice for certain kinds of crimes:[11] Swithun's 'loosing' of these chains indicates that the man's penance was complete, and that his sins had been forgiven. There are several other stories which describe Swithun's power to loose chains, including the release of a slave-girl from shackles, a woman freed from manacles, and the loosing of a slave's chains.[12] Lantfred comments explicitly at the end of this last story:

> Mirum namque hoc est ualde: quod sanctus iste Dei famulus, uenerabilis ac gloriosus, non solum meritis et orationibus modetur languentium doloribus, uerum etiam compeditos, soluit multos a ualidis ligaminibus, a columbare et compedibus, a carcere tenebroso et graui tormento.[13]

In addition to the development of this motif as a physical representation of sin, there is evidence that it was understood in the context of the afterlife and in particular, in the context of the interim between death and the universal judgement, or at the moment of death. Since earliest times, Christians have prayed for the safety of the souls of their departed loved ones, but there are also prayers where the supplicant requests divine or saintly aid either now, or for the future time of his/her own death. Naturally, St Peter was a popular choice for such requests, given his position as the gate-keeper to heaven, as the following prayer from the *Portiforium of St Wulfstan*, an eleventh-century prayer book from Worcester, illustrates:

> Rogo te beate petre princeps apostolorum et clavicularis regni caelestis, qui habes potestatem a domino ihesu christo animas ligandi atque soluendi, caelumque claudendi et aperiendi suscepisti potestatem; subueni michi pius intercessor ut per te protectionis et interuentionis auxilium a peccatorum meorum uinculis absolui, et inferni tenebras euadere, et portam regni caelestis te aperiente merear intrare: per

---

[8] E. g. Mt IX.2–5.

[9] Lantfred, *Translatio et miraculi S. Swithuni* §24, (ed. and transl. Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, p. 306/7).

[10] *Ibid.*, §34 (ed. and transl. *ibid.*, pp. 332/3–334/5).

[11] O'Brien O'Keefe, 'Body and Law', pp. 220–1; and Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, p. 306 n. 227.

[12] Lantfred, *Translatio et miraculi S. Swithuni* §§6, 38 and 39 (ed. and transl. Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 288/9–290/1, 330/1–332/3 and pp. 332/3.

[13] *Ibid.*, §39 (ed. and transl. *ibid.*, p. 332/3: 'This is highly remarkable: that this holy servant of God, who is venerable and glorious, should not only have healed the sufferings of the diseased through his merits and prayers, but that he even released many who were shackled from powerful bindings, from the head-collar and from foot shackles, from the dark prison and from severe punishments.')

summum pastorem et sanctissimum obsecro te, cui dixisti tu es christus filius dei uiui cui gloria in secula seculorum. Amen.[14]

This sounds rather metaphorical, but it seems possible that it was also understood rather more literally. Various biblical passages refer to chains in the otherworld, for example the second letter to Peter, where the author states that 'God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into chains of darkness to be held for judgement'.[15] Anglo-Saxon illustrations of bound angels are vivid, and the chains strong and often quite large. Five illustrations in the poetic manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11, show angels chained in hell, sometimes just Satan himself, sometimes many angels.[16] While Satan is bound, unable to escape, other angels holding whips beat him. Another image of Satan in chains occurs in Ælfwine's *Prayerbook*.[17] The illustration is of the 'Quinity': God as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as well as the Virgin and Child, and beneath the feet of Jesus is Satan, fettered tightly and

sharing hell with Arius and Judas, who are also enchained. It is not just wicked angels, therefore, who are bound in chains, but also human sinners.

These pictures were stark reminders of what could befall the sinner who did not confess his sin and return to the true way. Although it is possible that similar images may have existed as wall-paintings in churches, it is not clear how many people would have had access to such pictures. Ælfwine's *Prayerbook*, for example, is a personal prayerbook which belonged to Ælfwine, the dean of the New Minster, Winchester, in the early eleventh century.[18] The prayerbook seems to have been made for his own personal use, and he may also be the artist who drew the 'Quinity'.[19] It is therefore unlikely that very many people saw this particular image, although it is clear that the belief itself was not unusual. On the other hand, this motif reappears in other contexts which lent themselves to wider circulation.

A dramatic story in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* describes the efficacy of the mass as an agent for release from sin.[20] A thegn, Imma, was taken captive in battle and bound by his captor to prevent him escaping. However, Imma's chains kept loosing themselves, to the puzzlement of the captor, who asked if Imma was performing loosing spells. Imma replied that he did not know any loosing spells, but that he had a brother who was a priest, who thought he was dead. This brother, said Imma, was probably offering masses on his behalf, so

---

[14] A. Hughes, ed., *The Portiforium of St Wulfstan: Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS. 391*, 2 vols., Henry Bradshaw Society 89–90 (Leighton Buzzard, 1958–60) II. 9. 'I ask you, blessed Peter, prince of the apostles, and key-bearer of the kingdom of heaven, who have the power from our Lord Jesus Christ of binding and loosing souls, and have received the power of closing and opening heaven; help me, pious intercessor, so that through the aid of your protection and intervention, I may be worthy to be released from the chains of my sins, and to avoid the darkness of the infernal regions, and as you open them, to enter the doors of the kingdom of heaven: through the most high and holy shepherd I beseech you, who said you are Christ, Son of the living God, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.' (My translation.)

[15] II Peter II.4.

[16] See pp. 3, 16, 20 36, and p. 17.

[17] London, British Library, Cotton Titus D.xxvii, fol. 75v: B. Günzel, ed., *Ælfwine's Prayerbook (London, British Library, Cotton Titus D.xxvi + xxvii)* (London, 1993).

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

[19] S. Keynes, *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster and Hyde Abbey, Winchester: British Library Stowe 944: Together with Leaves from British Library Cotton Vespasian A. VIII and British Library Cotton Titus D. XXVII*, EEMF 26 (Copenhagen, 1996), p. 113.

[20] Bede, *HE* IV.22 (B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, ed. and transl., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, OMT (Oxford, 1969), pp. 404/5).

that if he was in the otherworld, his soul would be released from its punishment by his intercessions. Later, when he returned to his brother, Imma discovered that it was at exactly the times that his brother had said mass that the chains had loosed themselves.

The idea of the efficacy of the mass for departed souls is very old, and is found frequently in the *Dialogi* of Gregory the Great, where there is even a story very similar to that of Imma: a man taken captive had masses offered for him by his wife, and it was on those days that his chains fell off.[21] The extremely wide circulation of both the *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the *Dialogi*, and the choice of both works for vernacular translation in the ninth century, suggests that the essential point would have been received by a large number of people. That the offering of mass for someone could produce an actual, physical release from chains indicates just how real and potent the chains of sin were held to be, and how valuable was the mass in forgiveness of that sin.

Bede's final comment on the story of Imma is as follows:

> Multique, haec a praefato uiro audientes, accensi sunt in fide ac deuotione pietatis ad orandum uel ad elimosynas faciendas uel ad offerendas Deo uictimas sacrae oblationis pro ereptione suorum, qui de saeculo migrauerant; intellexerunt enim, quia sacrificium salutare ad redemtionem ualeret et animae et corporis sempiternam.[22]

It is particularly noteworthy that he claims that the story inspired people to have masses said for their departed relatives. Although the

practice of offering masses for the dead was ancient and well-established by the time Bede was writing, it is not clear how frequently masses were said for departed members of the laity, rather than those in religious life. Several stories in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* describe that masses were offered for monks after their deaths, but there are very few episodes which mention masses for the laity.[23] Some documents have specific regulations for when and how the dead ought to be commemorated with masses. The Old English *Scriftboc*, for example, prescribes that a mass may be sung for a monk on the third day, or after seven days.[24] The same is true for a layman who has completed all necessary penance prior to his death. For a man who died penitent, it was possible to sing mass for him after thirty days, or after seven if his relatives fasted on his behalf and made offerings for his soul.[25] Further on, it describes that for laymen, masses could be sung on the third day, the ninth, the nineteenth day, and the thirtieth; and for monks, masses could be sung every Sunday and their names read out.[26] This passage of the *Scriftboc* is based on the penitential of Theodore; it is possible that its present Old English form dates from as early as before the mid-tenth century.[27]

Later texts, such as Ælfric's *Letter to the Monks of Eynsham* (itself based in large part on the *Regularis Concordia*) provide much more elaborate instructions and rules for the masses to be said on the death

---

[21] *Dialogi* IV. 59.

[22] Ed. and transl. Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, pp. 404/5: 'Many who heard about this from Imma were inspired to greater faith and devotion, to prayer and almsgiving and to the offering up of sacrifices to God in the holy oblation, for the deliverance of their kinsfolk who had departed from the world; for they realized that the saving sacrifice availed for the everlasting redemption of both body and soul.'

---

[23] The story of the wicked monk-blacksmith in V. 14, for example.

[24] This text is found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 121, fols. 87b–101a; Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 190, pp. 371–82; and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud. Misc. 482, pp. 30b–39a: A. J. Frantzen, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Penitentials: a Cultural Database*, <http://www.anglo-saxon.net/penance/>; this and all subsequent references accessed December 2007.

[25] Canons X20.01.01 and X20.02.01, (ed. Frantzen, *Anglo-Saxon Penitentials*).

[26] Canons X21.04.01 and X21.05.01, (ed. Frantzen, *Anglo-Saxon Penitentials*).

[27] Frantzen, *Anglo-Saxon Penitentials*.

of a monk, including, for example, the instruction that all the priests in a monastery should each say a mass daily during the thirty days after the brother died.[28] The few tenth- and eleventh-century guild regulations which survive also focus strongly on masses and offerings for the dead: the Exeter guild statutes, for example, record that at each meeting, two masses are to be sung, one for dead members and one for living.[29]

The increasing emphasis on offerings for the dead throughout the Anglo-Saxon period served to bring the Church and laity closer together, as the laity desired to help the souls of their dead relatives. This in turn strengthened the ties between the living and the departed, as it was perceived more and more that duty to one's kin did not stop with death. If anything, the obligation became even stronger, since the departed relative was no longer in a position to help him- or herself. The impetus was placed firmly on the surviving relatives to offer aid by way of masses, prayers and almsgiving, with the understanding that these would loose the chains of sin binding down the soul in the afterlife. The result of this is clear in surviving wills and charters, even from an early period.

In a charter from 749, King Æthelbald of Mercia (716–57) made a donation to free his soul *ab omni uinculo delictorum* ('from every chain of wickedness').[30] Although Æthelbald is concerned here only with his own soul, other documents record grants made variously for the souls of parents and/or grandparents of the donor, or of the king, in

addition to the donor's own soul. A charter from 762 records that Dunwald gave land to the church of SS Peter and Paul, where the body of his lord Æthelbert rested, both for his soul and for Æthelbert's.[31] Towards the end of the tenth century, the will of Wulfwaru records her grant of land to the monastery of St Peter's in Bath for her soul and the souls of her ancestors, from whom she received her property.[32]

It would be easy to interpret these simply in the context of the growing awareness of the purgatorial interim and the possibilities for post-mortem forgiveness of sin. In this context, the idea of chains could simply be a convenient figurative expression to convey the importance of good behaviour. But returning to the saints, there are yet again instances which suggest strongly that these chains were imagined in a much more real and physical way.

Ælfwine's *Prayerbook* contains several prayers in which the supplicant asks St Nicholas to help him at the hour of death.[33] As previously mentioned, this type of request is found quite frequently, and the same book contains prayers to saints such as Mary, Peter, and Benedict which also ask this. But what makes these prayers relatively unusual in this context is that the cult of St Nicholas was only really starting to catch on in England during the late tenth and early eleventh century, and so these prayers appear at a relatively early stage in the growth of that cult. The veneration of St Nicholas really burgeoned in England after the Norman Conquest, when his cult was encouraged by the Normans, perhaps because of their links with Sicily and South Italy: the relics of Nicholas were transferred from

---

[28] Ælfric, *Letter to the Monks of* Eynsham, cc. 65–9 (C. A. Jones, ed. *Ælfric's Letter to the Monks of Eynsham*, CSASE 24 (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 140–4).

[29] D. Whitelock, *Councils & Synods: with Other Documents Relating to the English Church*, (Oxford, 1964), pp. 58–60.

[30] S 92. (The references to Anglo-Saxon documents in this form refer to the number given in P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography* (London, 1968).)

[31] S 1182.

[32] S 1538.

[33] BL, Cotton Titus D.xxvi, fols. 76r–79r (ed. Günzel, *Ælfwine's Prayerbook*, pp. 195–7).

Myra to Bari by Italian sailors in the second half of the eleventh century.[34]

According to legend, St Nicholas was a late third-/early fourth-century bishop of Myra. Perhaps the most famous story about St Nicholas now is his gift of three bags of gold to a poor man as dowries for his daughters, which lies behind his reincarnation as Santa Claus. In the middle ages, however, a more popular story was an encounter between Nicholas and three of Constantine's generals.[35] Nicholas met these generals on their way to subdue heathens, and they saw him free three sailors from unjust death by a malevolent local ruler. Later, once the generals had returned to Constantinople, they became the target of a plot at Constantine's court, and were imprisoned. Awaiting execution, they remembered Nicholas' role in the freeing of the sailors, and called upon him for help. Nicholas appeared to Constantine in a dream, and instructed him to free the men: after satisfying himself that the men were not guilty of witchcraft, Constantine released the three generals.

It is the act of releasing, performed by St Nicholas at least twice, which seems to have been so important here. And it should not be forgotten that in addition to the miraculous release effected by Nicholas, his status as a bishop granted him the power of binding and loosing in the more formal sense of absolution. One of the prayers in Ælfwine's prayerbook explicitly asks for the chains of sin to be loosed by the intercession of Bishop Nicholas:

---

[34] E. M. Treharne, *The Old English Life of St Nicholas with the Old English Life of St Giles*, Leeds Texts and Monographs: New Series 15 (Leeds, 1997), p. 36; and C. W. Jones, *The Saint Nicholas Liturgy and Its Literary Relationships: Ninth to Twelfth Centuries by C.W. Jones; with an Essay on the Music by G. Reaney.*, University of California Publications, English Studies 27 (Berkeley, 1963), p. 120.

[35] Treharne, *The Old English Life of St Nicholas*, pp. 48–9.

> Celi terreque conditor, Deus benignissime, exaudi, queso, deprecationem humilitatis mee, ut me peccatorem, quem conscientia coram maiestate tua nimis grauiter accusat, intercessio gloriosissimi pontificis tui Nicolai a peccatorum uinculis soluat, et ad eterne mansionis gaudia, te, Domine Iesu Christe, annuente perducat.[36]

Since the book was compiled for Ælfwine personally, and he may have had a role in its production, it is likely that these prayers represent something of Ælfwine's individual tastes. Moreover, we find not just one prayer here, but five, all appearing together, suggesting that these were collected together with some purpose in mind. Nicholas released physical chains during his lifetime, but is here invoked to release chains of sin, and it is precisely the comparison between these two which indicates that those chains of sin were held to be binding in a way rather more physical than metaphorical.

St. Swithun, who was also remembered for his power to loose chains, is invoked in exactly this context in the *Secreta* of the mass liturgy for the feast of his Translation:

> Munus quod tibi offerimus, Domine, quaesumus gratanter suscipe, et suffragante beati confessoris tui atque pontificis Suuithuni intercessione, omnes nostrorum nexus peccaminum soluat ac lucrum sempiternitatis nobis adquirat.[37]

---

[36] Cotton Titus D.xxvi, fol. 77v, *Ælfwine's Prayerbook*, ed. Günzel, p. 196. 'Creator of heaven and earth, most bountiful God, hear, I beg you, the prayer of my humility, that when conscience accuses me, a sinner, most gravely, in the presence of your majesty, the intercession of your most glorious Bishop Nicholas may release me from the chains of sin, and lead me to the joy of the eternal dwelling-place, as you, Lord Jesus Christ, permit.' (My translation.)

[37] Ed. and transl. Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, p. 78/9: 'Accept willingly, O Lord, the gift which we offer to You and, with the intercession of Your blessed confessor and bishop Swithun in attendance, may it dissolve all the chains of our sins and purchase for us the wealth of eternity.'

A mass for the living and the dead from the *Leofric Missal* which mentions St Swithun begins 'Pietate tua quesumus, Domine, nostrorum omnium solue uincula delictorum…'.[38] Again, the connection between Swithun's ability to loose physical chains during his life and his power of intercession for the chains of sin after death is very strong. And since the mass was one of the ways of loosing the chains of sin, the invocation here is all the more potent.

So far, there have been two possibilities for the time-frame in which such loosing can take place. The first is in this world, when it might take the form of removal of visible, physical chains, or in the cure of a sickness. The second, slightly vaguer, is in the next world: the story of Imma illustrates how the chains of sin in the afterlife would be broken by the power of the mass, and the importance of masses for the departed testifies to this belief. In this second time-frame, we come to the interim period, when souls await the universal judgement after their death. From about the second century, the notion of the individual judgement became important:[39] that is, that immediately after death, souls will be 'pre-judged', so that they can await the universal judgement in a place appropriate to their merits or status. If the souls of the dead were to receive any post-mortem aid, it had to be given during this interim period, since one's status at the universal judgement was final.

Despite this, there are several prayers in which the supplicant asks a saint or saints for aid at that final judgement. At this point, it should theoretically be too late for saintly help. A common penitential motif in Anglo-Saxon literature warns that it is better to

---

[38] Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 579, fol. 20r-v (ed. and transl. Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 82/3: 'We ask, O Lord, that through Your mercy You release the chains of all our sins…').
[39] B. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: a Handbook of Patristic Eschatology*, (Cambridge, 1991), p. 220.

confess sins now on earth than to have to confess them at the universal judgement, when there is no hiding and no turning back.[40] And yet the power of the apostles to bind or to loose was clearly held to be so powerful that they could provide help even in this final hour:

> Sanctissimi apostoli electi dei uos elegit dominus in salutem populi sui, uobis dedit potestatem ligandi atque soluendi et remittendi peccata. Uos estis lux mundi, uos iudicabitis tribus israel cum uenerit dominus iudicare uiuos et mortuos in gloria maiestatis sue et reddere unicuiuque iuxta opera sua, et ego miser peccator et fragilis quid ero facturus, cum uenero ante tribunal tanti iudicis propter uitia et peccata que male comisi. Adiuuate me electi. O altitudo quicumque estis amici dei quos honorauit dominus et exultauit et considere fecit in gloria regni sui. Amen.[41]

Apostolic aid is particularly important here since without it, and condemned to hell, the chains that bound would be for eternity, with no hope of release. The judgement, and the strict division between good and wicked that follows it, is very clear in the Bible, unlike the interim between death and judgement. It was therefore the judgement that was pre-eminent in most Christians' minds for a long time, rather than the interim. This probably explains why it is that, despite the evident importance of the mass and the connection of the living to

---

[40] M. Godden, 'An Old English Penitential Motif', *ASE* 2 (1973), pp. 221–39.
[41] *Wulfstan Portiforium*, ed. Hughes, II.10. 'Most holy apostles, chosen by God, the Lord chose you for the salvation of his people, he gave to you the power of binding and loosing and of forgiveness of sins. You are the light of the world, you will judge the tribes of Israel when the Lord comes to judge the living and the dead in the glory of his majesty and to render to each one according to his works, and I, wretched, a sinner, and fragile, what will I do, when I come before the judgement seat of such a judge because of the vices and sins which I have committed wickedly? Help me, chosen ones. O loftiness, all of you who are the friends of God, whom the Lord has honoured and exalted and made to sit with him in the glory of his kingdom. Amen.' (My translation.)

the souls in the interim, it is the judgement which features so strongly in so many late Anglo-Saxon homilies, and not the interim.

The concern with the fate of the soul after death is tightly connected with the idea of the chains of sin, which could bind in the present, in the interim, and for eternity. These chains were both metaphorical and physical, and helped to make the terrifying and unknown prospect of the afterlife somewhat easier to understand. In addition, this motif served to reinforce the continuing link between living and dead, clarifying how the offerings of the living could ease the suffering of departed souls. Although most of the references to this idea come from sources with a monastic – and Winchester[42] – bias, the few which do come from other documents suggest that the idea was reasonably widespread. The interpretation of sin as chains and the emphasis placed on the power of loosing them by masses, almsgiving, prayer and fasting shaped the way the Anglo-Saxons viewed their obligation to the dead and their conception of the interim state. Furthermore, it seems possible that it was precisely this idea which could make St Nicholas, a late addition to the ranks of saints venerated in England, a natural choice for a supplicant desiring post-mortem release from sin.

---

[42] It is interesting that it was at Winchester, where Swithun was pre-eminent, that the prayers to St Nicholas surface, but this should not be overplayed, since it seems that St Nicholas was revered at Worcester too, especially by St Wulfstan in the later eleventh century: Treharne, *The Old English Life of St Nicholas*, p. 40; and Jones, *The St Nicholas Liturgy*, pp. 8–10 and 120.