

Sermon for 12th June 2016, within the Solemnity of St George

I want to talk about three things. I want to talk about George, I want to talk about George and I want to talk about George. I don't want to talk about George I, George II and George III, because then I'd be talking about three kings, not three things, and that would be a sermon for Epiphany. Today is not Epiphany, but the Sunday within the Solemnity of **Saint** George, so George is a not unreasonable theme, and I want to say something about community life, as part of this service in which we make a renewal of intention – a renewal of commitment to the life of this community.

A sermon about George, George and George will be a bit difficult to follow – certainly for me, and probably for you as well, so I'll make it clearer: I want to talk about three things; I want to talk about a legend, I want to talk about a hero and I want to talk about a gardener. A legend, a hero and a gardener – three things.

First, the legend. The story of St George achieved mass circulation when it was printed in 1483 by Caxton in a book called *The Golden Legend*. In this version of the legend, St George was a knight, born in Cappadocia. On one occasion, he came to a city in Libya. By the city was a stagnant pond as large as a lake, in which lived a dragon infected with the plague who terrorized the region.

The people of the town had begun to feed the dragon two sheep every day to prevent it attacking them; when the sheep began to run out, they gave it one sheep and one human. The king decreed that the human sacrifice should be chosen by lot. This continued until the king's daughter was selected. (These legends have a certain predictability to them, don't they?) The king tried to bargain his way out of it, offering all his gold and silver, and half his kingdom if his daughter were spared, but the townspeople were adamant that she should be delivered to the dragon, just as many of their children had been.

The daughter was sent out to the lake, dressed as a bride, to be fed to the dragon. St George, who just happened to be passing, asked the lady what was going on. She told him about the dragon and begged him to leave before it appeared and killed him too.

I'll let the *Golden Legend* tell you what happened next:

'Then said St George: Fair daughter, doubt ye nothing hereof, for I shall help thee in the name of Jesu Christ. She said: For God's sake, good knight, go your way, and abide not with me, for ye may not deliver me.

Thus as they spake together, the dragon appeared and came running at them. And St George was upon his horse, and drew out his sword, and fortified himself with the sign of the cross, and rode hardily against the dragon – which came towards him – and smote him with his spear and hurt him sore and threw him to the ground. And after, said to the maid: Deliver to me your girdle, and bind it about the neck of the dragon and be not afear'd. When she had done so, the dragon followed as it were a meek beast and debonair.'

The princess led the defeated dragon into the city, causing much panic and alarm until George told the people not to be afraid: "Doubt ye nothing; believe ye in God, Jesu Christ, and do ye to be baptized and I shall slay the dragon." The king was baptized, followed by all his people, whereupon George killed the dragon and had it dragged out of the city (requiring four ox carts to do so) and its body thrown into the fields.

The telling and re-telling of legends such as these, is an important part of many cultures and traditions all over the world. And it's tradition more than legend that I really want to mention today.

The church is tying itself in knots, devising all manner of new forms of worship, some of which draw people in, but it's too soon to tell whether the attraction will last and those people will stay within the church. At the other end of worship's spectrum are more traditional styles of worship, principally the English choral tradition, such as we have here. And this style, this tradition, continues to have appeal and to draw people in, and to help them towards an experience of the living God whom we profess. It's really important to uphold tradition alongside new and innovative ideas, and not let it all be swept away in the fierce tide of modernism – babies and bathwater as it were..

The renewal of intention that follows this sermon begins and ends with commitment to the worship of this chapel. Worship and tradition lie at the very centre of our College and community; the chapel is our beating heart.

George, the legend, and the importance of tradition.

Now the hero.

In the Middle Ages, people expected their heroes to have undergone all manner of ghastly experiences. The poppy head stall ends on the south side of the Quire, where some of you are sitting, tell some of the legends about St George and his heroism. George is said to have been tortured in a number of gruesome and hideous ways. He was forced to swallow poison; crushed between two spiked wheels; boiled in a cauldron of molten lead – these are just some of the highlights of the tale. None of these attempts killed him and his wounds were healed in the night by Christ himself. George was told his life would be spared if he offered sacrifice to the Roman gods. The people assembled to see him do so, but instead George prayed to the Christian God. The legends tell us that fire came down from heaven, an earthquake shook the ground, and priests, idols and the pagan temple buildings were destroyed.

Heroes in legend, like St George, fight for what is right; they fight for the oppressed, the vulnerable and the down-trodden. In the main part of the legend, St George gallops to the rescue of the inevitable damsel in distress. He rescues a village held in thrall to the dragon and forced to make human sacrifices. Obviously, with such stories, it's much more important to engage with the allegorical meaning behind the legend than to worry about whether St George and his dragon really existed – the battle is against evil and oppression in the real world more than dragons in the world of myth and legend.

We, like George our patron, are to engage in this same battle for what is right, protecting the lives and the rights of the poor, the weak and the oppressed. We, like George our patron, are called to be heroes; and the world has plenty of allegorical damsels in distress for us to rescue, galloping along on our white chargers.

George, the hero, and the fight for justice and freedom.

And finally ...

Once upon a time, when I was at College and struggling heroically, like a damsel in distress, against the ferocious dragon attempting to teach me Greek, I had to translate a verse from St John's gospel on sight. There was a word in the verse that I hadn't seen before, but the Greek letters appeared to spell a name. So I proudly offered, "Jesus said, 'I am the vine, my father is George'," which seemed perfectly reasonable to me, albeit a little unfamiliar. What I saw in front of me was an unfamiliar Greek word that is the origin of the name George. The first half of the work is where we get words like geology and geography – it's all about the world, the earth, the stuff of which our planet's made. The second half is all about work, from which we derive ergonomics and similar words. So George, γεωργος, is someone who works the land, a farmer, a gardener. Jesus said, "I am the vine, my father is the gardener," is probably a better translation than the one I offered.

Gardening is about tending a piece of land, or a window box and three tubs on a terrace. It's about care and nurture, giving plants the nourishment they need and encouraging them to grow.

Our calling, as humans and as Christians, is to care for others, to nurture them, to help them grow and thrive. The heroic, traditional language of the third part of the renewal of intention says, "Will you pray earnestly for the most excellent gift of charity, that you may love your neighbours as yourselves, and bear one another's burdens gladly and willingly?" This 'charity' is an essential requirement of life in community – whether it be the Community of the College of St George or the community of the wider world.

We saw this very clearly last week when lightning struck the College and a storm of freakish proportions inundated us. People around the community were out in the middle of the night, helping each other, caring for each other, making sure everyone was safe, mitigating, as best they were able, the effects of the storm. This was community in action, love of our neighbours, that most excellent gift of charity.

Today marks the end of National Volunteers Week, a week when we give thanks for the truly vast numbers of people who freely give their time to help others in their communities. This College and chapel share in the benefits of that gift – with so many offering their time, talents and enthusiasm in so many ways – enhancing our worship, our hospitality to visitors and the way in which we present the history, tradition and beauty of our buildings. This is gardening in its own way.

Three things: George, the legend, and the value of tradition in worship and elsewhere.

George, the hero, and the fight against oppression.

And George, the gardener, and the call to care for others and to cultivate the excellent gift of charity. Amen.

Mark Powell