

**A Sermon preached by the Dean of Windsor, the Rt Reverend Dr Christopher Cocksworth at Morning Prayer on the Solemnity of St George in St George's Chapel, Windsor 16<sup>th</sup> June 2024**

***The Reading: Ephesians: 1.3-14***

In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

## **Ephesus**

'God chose you in Christ,' St Paul tells the Christians in Ephesus.

I was in Ephesus recently. You can still walk its wide, marble streets, sit in its vast amphitheatre, and touch the shelves in its learned library. In St Paul's day it was already an ancient city. Cosmopolitan and prosperous, it was famously the heart of the cult of Artemis, goddess of life and fertility, whose vast Temple was one of the seven wonders of the world.

Hidden in this self-confident city on the western coast of modern day Turkey, was a small group of people, followers of a crucified Jew, with a new vision for the world.

To them Paul proclaimed: 'God has chosen you in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him *in love*.'

Before the first stone was laid in this vast city, Paul says, you were 'destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things'. And this is not because of your skills, your wealth, your power, not even your goodness, but because of God's goodness. God chose, Paul says, 'to lavish the riches of his grace upon you'.

Over these three days of the Solemnity of St George, we consider our calling in this place, in this time.

‘Why did God raise up this College of St George, with our magnificent Chapel?’

‘Why did God raise up the Order of the Garter, with its great responsibilities?’

‘And why St George? Why has God given us St George the blessed Martyr to be our patron and inspiration?’

### **St George**

You can’t get away from St George in Windsor – wrestling with the dragon, the symbol of evil in all its false power, the epitome of all the forces of anti-life in our world.

George is doing battle with evil. He’s not running from it. He’s facing it head on, courageously. He won’t give up until evil is defeated, until the devil is done over, until Satan is trampled underfoot, until life-giving good triumphs over death-dealing evil.

Doing battle with the world’s evils, I suggest, lies at the deep core of the Most Honourable and Noble Order of the Garter.

Supporting, by prayer and spiritual counsel, those engaged in fighting the ills of the world, I suggest, lies at the heart of the College of St George.

Overcoming sin, the world’s woes and the diabolical grip of evil that squeezes the life out of God’s good creation, is at the centre of, what St Paul calls, ‘the mystery of God’s will’.

Make no mistake about it, says Paul to the small group of Christians in Ephesus, 'God accomplishes all things according to his purpose'. God will not ultimately let anything get in the way of his good purposes of life and love for his whole creation.

And the means he has chosen to do this, as unlikely as it sounds, is the crucified Jew, executed by the forces of anti-life, whom God, in the indefatigable power of his love, raised from the dead and made Lord of all.

### **The evils of the world**

Every age has its evils but there's a sense in which today's evils – today's forces of anti-life – can feel overwhelming: a permacrisis, as it's sometimes called, with wave after wave of world-challenges crashing over us.

The crisis of health and health care, still present in the shadow of Covid. The cost-of-living crisis in a vulnerable global economy. The crisis of conflict, with war raging in Europe and the Middle East, with all their risks of escalation. The ever-deepening ecological, environmental and climate crisis that threatens our existence.

All these causing a crisis of mass movement of populations with traumas for those uprooted from their homes and tensions in the societies where they seek refuge. To add to the turbulence: signs of a crisis of democracy in lands that took it for granted.

And then, of course, stoking them all is the evil that prowls around every human soul, seeking to devour us, the evils that can sink into the soul and harden the human heart: hate, fear, envy and more.

### **Christ's ways and Christ's victory**

It can all feel overwhelming. But St Paul exhorts the Ephesian Christians, and us with them: You 'have set our hope on Christ': 'live for the praise of his glory'.

What does that look like for us today, as we face the evils of the world? What does it look like for the Knights of the Garter, for the politicians seeking election, for voters charged with great responsibility? And what does it mean for the College of St George six centuries after our foundation?

In many depictions around the Chapel and the Castle, George looks pretty fierce. Heavily clad in armour, wielding a mighty sword. But there is an icon that watches over every move I take in the Dean's Study. Here George looks strikingly unprotected as he rides his pure white steed. He holds the thinnest of spears that the iconographer could depict. Try killing a dragon with that! It would split in a moment and the fiery head of the beast rise up in a second to devour you.

But that's the point. George, one time apparatchik of the Roman Empire, gave up on the purposes of Rome to rule the world by the might of its power, in order to become a soldier for Christ, to re-set the world according to the purposes of God's love and mercy by the way of Christ.

His trust shifted from the technology of Caesar's army to rely on the weapons that Christ gave to him of which Paul speaks in

today's reading: 'the word of truth', 'the salvation' that Jesus brings, the strength of God's Holy Spirit. He put on the armour of God that Paul will tell us about in tomorrow's reading: truth, righteousness and faith, the good news of peace and the power of God's word.

And all that rooted in the faith that Christ has won for us the decisive battle in his D-Day with the devil on the cross, his victory proved in the resurrection.

Our reading of God's Word today assures us, as it did the Ephesian Christians, that God's 'plan for the fulness of time' is 'to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven, things on earth'.

***'To gather all things into an harmonious whole'*** tuned to the love of God in Christ: that's a purpose worth living for – and St George believed, together with the best of the Knights of the Garter through the ages, a purpose worth dying for.