

Royal Society of St George 2018 Gloucester Cathedral

In the presence of HRH The Princess Royal

Isaiah 43.1-7; John 15. 18-21

Many happy returns. Many happy returns to the Royal Society of St George here in Gloucestershire. 40 years young! Some of you here may have even been founder members those forty years go. Some of you, looking from where I'm standing (front row excepted) , may even have known St George himself!

Joking apart, to know St George, to really know St George, is to understand a way forward for us in these challenging times, a way ahead for the next forty years and beyond. You see enjoying lots of jingoistic music and pageantry is all very well, and we are allowed to enjoy the fruits of English culture, but to see it as an end in itself is to miss the point. If that is all this is, this Society will not last. But if we are to understand the truths behind the example and message of St George, then we shall have a worthy person of sainthood to follow and to share. And let's face it, whilst our culture is by no means at risk in these days, there are real challenges, such as leaving the European Union, a relationship of similar longevity as this Society (and that makes one think about origins doesn't it?) and challenges such as globalisation, global warming, modern slavery and what a modern liberal society is in this country, when in the same week as we welcome the leaders of the Commonwealth, the embarrassment of the treatment of the Windrush community has to be apologised for. Celebration Englishness is one thing, living it out is quite another.

The first thing in really knowing St. George is to recognise his ethnicity. It comes as a surprise to many that he didn't go to Eton or ever play in a World Cup, but that he was certainly Eastern, and never stepped on England's green and pleasant land. That tells us something about our welcome for those different from ourselves.

The next thing we should remember about St George is that he was a Christian, a person of genuine, committed, prayerful faith, not just someone who liked to dip

in and out of his belief according to his preferences. In fact George was so committed to Jesus Christ that, with all of his depicted suits of armour and battle with the dragon making it easy to miss, George in fact died for his faith. George is a martyr for Jesus, he lost his life, and he made the ultimate sacrifice, not for a country but for our Lord. This is why the flag of St George is flown, with the blood red cross of Jesus for all to see. To really know St George, is to know and understand and even emulate his service and his sacrifice. Our national identity therefore must always be about being faithful, perhaps more faithful than we now are, and recognising that in affirming the Christian faith, we are celebrating all people of faith, for valuing the faith of others is a Christian virtue.

The next thing we need to remember about St George is that in killing the mythical dragon, this foreign person of faith was slaying all those forms of evil, of radicalisation, of inequality and of abuse that still beset our world and our nation. St George is not only a hero; he is a sign of what we should be as people of this land, prepared to stand up for goodness and to challenge injustice wherever we find it.

If we really know St George, we can create a community that he would recognise. This will be a community that values its traditions and institutions, especially the Crown, but also a community that is genuinely for everyone, a community that seeks ever deepening inclusion and ever increasing generosity to those who are in need. This is a community that can slay dragons.

As we approach Brexit, and as we search for a new and enduring relationship with our nearest neighbours, we can certainly look to the community of the Commonwealth as a model. Here, we hold fast to what is true, but seek to leave behind any sense of colonialism. In the Commonwealth, the smallest can sit and eat with the most powerful, and the most powerful can speak up for the smallest island. The clue is in the name, an organisation for the common good and the wealth, the well-being of all. To this end, I would suggest the Commonwealth is a modern St George.

The Aims of this Society and the Branch are:-

1. To ensure that St. George's Day is properly celebrated,

2. To combat influences detrimental to England and the Commonwealth;
3. To honour those, in all walks of life, who have served England and the Commonwealth;
4. To provide opportunities for English people and others who love England to meet.

These are good aims, but I suspect we have been graced with the presence of Her Royal Highness today not to revel in English glory, but to re-commit ourselves to the real living out of those principles, which will cost us, which will mean we need to be more faithful, and which mean that we need to be even more radically inclusive.

As Isaiah said; ‘everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.’ Everyone. For in a new common-wealth, there can be no dragons.

Stephen Lake, Dean of Gloucester