

The Eve of St George's Day
St Thomas', Salisbury, Evensong, 2023

Jeremiah 15:15-21
Hebrews 11:32 – 12:2

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

“My dear people, today's feast increases our joy in the glory of Eastertide like a precious jewel whose shining beauty adds to the splendour of the gold in which it is set.” Words of Peter Damian, the Benedictine monk and cardinal of the 11th century. “Today's feast increases our joy in the glory of Eastertide like a precious jewel whose shining beauty adds to the splendour of the gold in which it is set.”

There are several important Feast Days that almost always fall at the beginning of Eastertide: St Mark, who we commemorate on Tuesday, St Philip and St James who we keep next Monday, and of course the feast of the patron of our country, St George, transferred to tomorrow by the Church, but most of civic society is celebrating it today.

I remember when I was starting out as a curate there was a tremendous nervousness about celebrating St George for fear of being interpreted as nationalistic; jingoistic. What *do* we want to say about our national identity, our Englishness, in the context of the Gospel, in the context of the family of faith? And I'm not sure that anxiety, that nervousness about talking about pride in our English identity has entirely been reconciled.

I could preach a homily about the fact that St George was Palestinian. We could reflect on the interesting tension of him being a soldier, and we could think about the justness, or otherwise, of war.

Instead I thought I would just offer you this evening a few lines from the rule of St Benedict. This section was actually read by Benedictines, including the Cistercian family, on Friday, the same day as the Deputy Prime Minister resigned amidst claims of bullying. Now whatever you personally feel about Dominic Raab, about whom I'm *not* going to preach, when we think about our Englishness, and when we pray perhaps particularly at St George's-tide for our leaders, and the sort of society that we might hope we can form, these words from St Benedict, 1500 years or so ago, might be useful. The section is about the Abbot, and they are about leadership:

“The Abbot must hate faults, but love the brothers. When he must punish them, he should use prudence and avoid extremes; otherwise, by rubbing too hard to remove the rust, you may break the vessel. He is to distrust his own frailty and remember *not to crush bruised reed*. He should prune faults away with prudence and love. Let him strive to be loved rather than feared.”

St Benedict has a vision of a community, a society, in which love rather than fear is the key to flourishing, the key to harmony, to *communion*. We could do worse on this feast of St George than to pray *that* for our leaders, ecclesiastical and civil. May our leadership be prudent, rather than extreme. Aware of its own frailty. Humble, in other words. Seeking to govern by love rather than fear.

And if that reminds you of someone, that is of course utterly intentional. St Benedict's model is Christ, whose resurrection we continue to celebrate in this season. Whose resurrection we have just praised in the anthem. God's promise to Israel in our Old Testament reading was that he would deliver them from the hand of the wicked, and redeem them from the grasp of the ruthless. Because God is the opposite of wicked and ruthless, and his rule, his governance, is good and merciful. And as our wonderful reading from Hebrews set before us, God who patterns for us a life of faith which “endures the cross,

disregarding its shame”, and hallows the trials, the struggles, all those things that we each bear, our “lesser Calvaries”, as John Stanhope Arkwright famously put it.

St George sparkles like a jewel in the golden setting of Easter, because his life was orientated towards Christ; pointing to a pattern not only for governance and leadership, but for discipleship. May our leaders, may our nation, may our own attitude towards everyone we meet seek be, in St Benedict’s words, to be loved rather than feared.

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