

A reflection for St George's Day 2014.

Preached at Choral Evensong for St George's Day.

I assume the founders of this parish chose St George as the patronal saint of this church building because it was a very English thing to do. There's nothing wrong with that! It would have seemed the most natural thing in the world back then when England really was 'the mother country'.

Today, it would be easy to let our celebration slip into nostalgia for 'the good old days'. St George, the patron saint of England, could be used to support a romanticized, in truth fantasy past. But far worse, it could lead to us being dangerously complacent about our own society and what the gospel might call for in these times.

St George the soldier worked for the state, the Roman Empire. In the days before the Christian faith was adopted as official he was a Christian when Christians were often persecuted. When such persecution occurred where he was, George chose to speak truth to power. George set aside his rank, his weapons and his personal safety, and confronted the Emperor Diocletian to challenge the wrong he was doing by acting violently towards a minority group, Christians, living within his borders.

It cost George his life. He chose to forfeit his life in this world rather than his faith. He started out as someone who accepted the status quo, but when those with power abused that power, George became one who dissented.

George died defending the vulnerable. He confronted the inner dragons of indifference to suffering, of excusing the misuse of authority, and of turning a blind eye when those in power fail in their most fundamental responsibilities.

George is a saint for these times but in a way we once would not have imagined was necessary. He is a multi-faith saint.

George is revered by Muslims as well as Christians. There are mosques dedicated in his name, as well as churches. He is a saint not just of England but of Turkey, Syria, Greece, parts of Russia, in Portugal and Venice,

Germany and Malvern. He is a global saint, an icon for a global time and a global future.

The time has come when we need George more than ever. Those with power in our society – and I include all governments and parliaments in this analysis – are forgetting that along with global opportunities for free trade comes global responsibilities. What kind of a society opens its purse for every global consumer product going, while it hardens its heart against every vulnerable stranger from around the globe, and its own vulnerable people.

What kind of leaders are we tolerating who provide us with ‘spin’ and cut backs and cut offs that affect those least able among us, that reduce what is spent on health care, and schools and housing for those who truly lack the resources to make choices, and leave the rest of us largely untouched?

What kind of a society says its defining national identity, *defining identity* they tell us, was forged in the violent invasion of a foreign land? What kind of a society accepts that this is sufficient basis for who we are as Australians?

These can be uncomfortable, even challenging questions for Anglicans. We are accustomed to being aligned with the dominant culture, supporting the way things are, sometimes even colluding in things we now repudiate. In the past our Church has resisted ending the slave trade, opposed women voting and taught the subordination of women, ignored domestic violence when perpetrated by its members, and pretended that gay people were ‘them’ not ‘us’. Of course, it has also been Christians, Anglicans among them, who have courageously opposed injustice and eventually brought about the change of heart the New Testament calls *metanoia* –conversion, turning governments and societies around and heading in new directions.

Our faith in Jesus enables us to live this *metanoia*, converted lives. We are not isolated individuals, good only for growing the economy; we are a people created to know and be known, to love and be loving in ways beyond monetary measure. We are not just voters in a competitive democracy where the loudest and largest take the prizes, we are citizens of

a kingdom – God’s realm – where all are winners when ‘we share *with justice* the resources of the earth’, as our prayer book says.

In a time when most settle for empty celebrity, George offers us a model of character. He does not belong to Englishness alone, or even Christians alone; he is not captive to the status quo and he is not afraid to speak out when the powerful behave badly.

Even more challenging, he is not one of the great saints; he is not an impossible figure but an ordinary person who, in response to God’s transforming presence in his life, decided that truth must be spoken even when those with the power of life and death will not tolerate the speaker.

We face no such danger, though we face compromise if we do not take George’s example seriously. Invite St George to step out of the shadows of compromise, and accompany you next time you vote, next time you watch the evening news, next time you meet our local members of parliament or comment on government decisions with friends.

St George looks to be just the kind of saint we need to become brave dissenters whenever *we* see human value ignored, or power and authority misused or God help us, even abused.

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