

The first reading is from the forty third chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah, beginning at the first verse.

Thus says the LORD,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the LORD your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

I give Egypt as your ransom,

Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

Because you are precious in my sight,

and honoured, and I love you,

I give people in return for you,

nations in exchange for your life.

Do not fear, for I am with you;

I will bring your offspring from the east,

and from the west I will gather you;

I will say to the north, 'Give them up',

and to the south, 'Do not withhold;

bring my sons from far away

and my daughters from the end of the earth –

everyone who is called by my name,

whom I created for my glory,

whom I formed and made.'

Here ends the first reading.

The second reading is from the fifteenth chapter of the gospel according to St John, beginning at the first verse.

Jesus said: 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.

Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Here ends the second reading.

St George's Day sermon for Choral Evensong 30 April 2017

It doesn't get much more 'Church of England' than this does it? Choral Evensong according to the Book of Common Prayer, clergy in cassocks and surplices, a robed choir and all in a much loved, much polished church building dedicated in the name of St George. The Curate and I were about to conduct a funeral together the other day. Dressed in cassocks and surplices, Jacqui said, "Blimey, we look like Leonard and Sydney!" "Yes, indeed," I replied, "we are Grantchester¹ on steroids."

Here, now, time and eternity meet and here we discover both have a human face.

It is not surprising that those who established this parish and built this church chose St George to be our patron saint. He is the patron saint of England. The Venerable Bede, who wrote the first history of the English Church in the 8th C makes mention of him among the saints of what was then an undivided church of east and west. George is loved and venerated still in both traditions.

The George's red cross on a white background, the English flag, is so closely associated with that country that when my English born grandsons came to visit just after the World Cup had been held, they said with a certain awe in their voices, "Oh Granny, did your church go for England in the world cup?" (These are not overly 'churched little boys, you understand.) I said, I thought they might well have! It would not be out of character, I thought to myself.

George of course is the patron saint of many countries but George took hold of the English imagination during the crusades. Richard the Lionheart adopted him as protector of the army. Edward III made him patron of the Order of the Garter in 1350. Shakespeare made sure that his place became unforgettable when he had Henry V finish his pre-battle of Agincourt speech with the famous words, 'Cry God for Harry, England and St. George!'

¹ This is a reference the BBC series Grantchester, based on the detective novels *The Grantchester Mysteries* by James Runcie, the son of a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie and featuring the fictitious Vicar of Grantchester (which really exists in Cambridgeshire; the parish church is St Mary and St Andrew), Sydney Chambers and his Curate, Leonard Finch.

Being a Christian in the English, the Anglican, tradition is a good way to live a faithful life. Ours is a tradition that reaches back to the earliest days of the spreading faith; we live and pray in continuity with Mary Magdalene and the first apostles and with the consolidation of belief forged in the Councils of the early Church. The Anglican instinct has always been for a church in and of the nation, free from interference in matters that rightly belonged to the local church. In the 11th C Henry II clashed with Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury over whether the Church was subject to English law. Beckett favoured church courts dealing with criminal behaviour by the clergy; the King did not.

The Church might have a universal spiritual authority, but the institution remained subject to English law. You may be hearing echoes of the current Royal commission in that comment! When King John surrendered his kingdom to the Pope and received it back as a fiefdom, there was real resentment when the Pope appointed Italian clerics to position in England. The reformation debate over who governed the English Church were not new when they arose in the reign of Henry VIII.

We live and pray also in continuity with the medieval church that placed equal emphasis on sacraments as scriptures and doctrines and enable ordinary people to celebrate the important moments in life in parish churches in villages and towns with family and community. And we continue to live and pray in the company of some very fine hearts and minds that have shaped our Anglican legacy.

Some key people include: Thomas Cranmer and other drafters of the Book of Common Prayer; Richard Hooker who so clearly articulated the community forming and the community destroying tendencies in religion and that any church must both *inspire and contain* religious zeal. Come back Hooker, the world today needs your moderating voice. We've had our failures and losses, being unable to retain either John Wesley and the Methodists in the 17th C, or in the 19th C John Henry Newman and other rejecters of a merely utilitarian church. Thank God, the Oxford Movement's recovery of the sacramental character of Christian life and the sheer beauty of worship conducted to its fullest, which Newman and others began, has endured.

We, of course, live in Australia and are members of the Anglican Church of Australia, subject to Australian law and seeking to enculturate how we express our faith in a land where Easter and autumn, not spring coincide and where worship and spirituality has been indigenous for 40,000 years. Nostalgia won't do to carry us into the future, though a better sense of history would make a difference to our theological debates and yes, outright power struggles, in synods.

St George calls us back to an even higher allegiance in a world where once again religion is a cause for strife and used to justify violence. It is deeply unfashionable to be an active Christian and too many of our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world and church are actually persecuted for their faith and community identity.

George, a Palestinian Christian and a Roman soldier serving his state had ultimately to choose between them when required to sacrifice to the Emperor as to a god. George understood that in the Christian faith, the initiative in sacrificial love is with God, who in the Word made flesh, Jesus our risen brother, renounced all glory, that we frail mortals might have a share in God's glory. Thus, the only sacrifice of which we Christians are capable is that of trust, and praise and thanksgiving, the most complete form of which is to surrender even our lives before giving in to the demands of idolatry.

St George is a salutary saint for a Church long wedded to a harmonious relationship with the civil authorities because he calls us, should push ever come to shove, to transcend even the best of our legacy and not compromise the whole purpose of it - that our hearts and minds may return from their erring ways and kneel before the Lord our maker whose truth endures from generation to generation, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be: world without end.

Colleen O'Reilly
Vicar of Malvern