

2019-04-28 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Revd Canon William Price
Jeremiah 15: 15 – end; Hebrews 11: 32 – 12:2
‘First Evensong of St. George’ Day’

This service is what is known in the trade as the First Evensong of St George’s Day, tomorrow being St George’s Day. But surely, you will say, St George’s Day is 23 April, Shakespeare’s birthday and death day. Well it is in most years, but this year 23 April was last Tuesday, the Tuesday in Easter Week, and there is a rule that no saint’s day can be commemorated in Easter Week. So St George’s Day has been moved to the first available day after Easter Week, tomorrow. Another major saint’s day fell on 25 April, last Thursday, that of St Mark. His day is also moved out of Easter Week to the first available day, and since St George has tomorrow, St Mark has Tuesday. Actually this week is rather special for lovers of saints’ days because Wednesday commemorates two more saints, Philip and James, 1 May.

So what of St George? He is the only Red Letter, that is first division, saint in our Calendar who does not appear in the New Testament. But he is a very popular saint in many countries. I have spoken about him here before, and since there is a limited amount that one can say about him I shall have to repeat some of the things I’ve said previously. St. George is not only Patron Saint of England. He is also Patron Saint of soldiers, farm workers, and boy scouts, and titular saint of numerous churches throughout the world, including of course our neighbouring Roman Catholic Church here in Whitchurch, the Church of St George, Protector of England. He has about 200 churches dedicated in his honour in the Church of England, including in Shropshire Clun, Milson, Pontesbury, Rodington, Shrewsbury, and Telford. He is also Patron Saint of Egypt, Bulgaria, Aragon, Catalonia, Romania, Ethiopia, Greece, Malta, India, Iraq, Lithuania, Palestine, Portugal, Serbia, Ukraine, and Russia, and apparently Tamworth, although I don’t know how well known that is in Tamworth. And a whole country is named after him, Georgia, where there are said to be 365 churches dedicated in his honour. (The other Georgia, in the United States, is named after King George II, sovereign when the colony was founded.)

But given that his fame, his cult, is so widespread, it’s a bit odd that virtually nothing is known about him, and some scholars doubt whether St. George ever actually existed, although most scholars do believe that there really was such a man. It is likely that he was put to death for being a Christian at or near Lydda in Palestine in about the year 303 during the persecution of Christians by the Emperor Diocletian, and that is the most that we can with some degree of certainty say.

Of course with St George we immediately think of the dragon, as in the pubs called ‘The George and Dragon’. By the late Middle Ages St George was a popular figure in stained glass windows and he was always shown with the dragon, so the two became inseparable in people’s minds. A late medieval book called the Golden Legend portrayed St George as a knight from Cappadocia (in present day Turkey), who at Silene in Libya rescued the king’s daughter from the dragon, a fierce creature which terrified the locals. For time he had been appeased with a daily offering of two sheep, but when sheep became scarce he was appeased by a human being, chosen by lot, and hence on one occasion the king’s daughter. George tamed the dragon and saved the princess. Then he told the people not to be afraid. If they would be baptized and believe in Jesus he would kill the dragon, which he did (although that seems a shame if the dragon had been tamed) and thousands were baptized.

But how did this rather elusive Palestinian saint become the Patron Saint of England. (Looking at the 3 other countries in Britain, St David of Wales was Welsh and lived in Wales. St Patrick of Ireland was born on this side of the Irish Sea but spent much of his life in Ireland. St Andrew became Patron Saint of Scotland because apparently a relic of him, perhaps an arm, was taken to the place now called St Andrews in Fife.) But why is St George the Patron Saint of England? There were churches of St George in England before 1066 and the coming of the Normans, but it was probably with the establishment of the Order **PTO**

of the Garter in about 1347 that St George began to displace St Edmund or King Edward the Confessor as Patron Saint of England. It was then that the Chapel of St George at Windsor was built as the chapel of the Order of the Garter, which it still is. Doubtless the soldiers returning from the Crusades did much to establish his popularity. And so in the play Henry V, Shakespeare put into the mouth of the King at the Battle of Agincourt those resounding words 'Cry God for Harry, England, and St George'. And of course it is the cross of St George which adorns the flags of English football fans to this day.

It's impossible to try to talk about ways in which we ought to copy St George in our lives, since we know nothing about him, but we can, and ought, to use this feast of our Patron Saint to pray for England, for our Queen and for all those who bear responsibility for ordering our national life, especially at this time of great political crisis. We have many blessings as a country, and we have a great inheritance, surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, as the second lesson put it. Our duty, our responsibility, is to hand on our priceless inheritance to future generations, always looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, crucified and glorified. St George, by his life and death – however little we really know about him – bore witness to Jesus, his and our Lord. May we with George share in the fullness of Jesus's resurrection.