

Feast of St George

Evensong

Is 43: 1-7

The celebration of a patronal festival is a special occasion in the life of a parish church. I am honoured to be here with you for this festival, and very grateful to Brian for the invitation to preach. I am especially grateful too because Stephanie, your curate, was with me in Mirfield as she studied for ordination - and it is good to visit where she is to see that you are taking good care of her. I know how happy she is to be here as your curate.

St George is a rather enigmatic figure to have as a patron. I think I can say this - although I am a Canadian, England has been my home for well over twenty years, and so I can count George as my patron too.

I say enigmatic, because we know almost nothing about George. He lived and died a martyr in the 4th century. He lived and died in a world in which it was not politically acceptable to be a Christian. Being a Christian was a very risky business. He died for his faith. And following his death, some eight hundred years later, a legend grew up around him that he had slayed a dragon.

This brings me to dragons. Why should this legend be attributed to George? And what could be so enduring about this legend that George went on to become, and has remained, patron of England and of this parish church.

Dragons are not all created equal. Some of you may be familiar with the children's song *Puff the Magic Dragon*. When I was a child I had a record of this

song, and although I loved it, it also made me feel very sad for the dragon.

Puff was a friendly dragon and a little boy, Jackie Paper, was his best friend. But, as the song tells us 'dragons live forever but not so little boys', and one day Jackie grew up, grew out of his friendship with Puff, and Puff, we are told, retreats sadly into his cave as he realises his friend is not coming any more to play.

Dragons live forever - dragons are symbols of eternity, of eternal life. In Puff's case, a symbol of eternal friendship. Yet, in the case of the dragon slain by George the dragon is symbol of eternal destruction, eternal death. In slaying the dragon George has put to death death itself. George has overcome death.

Here we are, one week after the resurrection of Jesus. One week after Easter. One week after that great mystery in which we celebrate God's victory over death - a victory in which we all share. A victory that changes everything. God has revealed to us the depth of God's faithfulness to us, a faithfulness stronger than death.

Easter, the resurrection of God's beloved son whom we put to death, reveals nothing less than the truth that God's love goes beyond death. Or maybe it is better to say, God's love passes through death. God's love endures in spite of death.

This passage from Isaiah we have just heard: 'Do not fear... 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. I have redeemed you, because you are precious in my sight and I love you.'

This mystery, this hope was the faith that inspired George. As an early Christian George lived literally in the shadow of the cross. To find the courage to be faithful to Christ meant digging deep into Easter hope. It meant taking the resurrection of Jesus seriously. It meant trusting every day that God's faithfulness to us is stronger than death because death was a reality - dying for one's faith was a real and present danger. Again from Isaiah: 'do not fear, for I am with you.'

We know just enough about George to know why he was honoured and remembered by his fellow Christians. He lived and died because of his faith in Christ, his trust in God's faithfulness to him. George held fast to Easter hope and he was remembered by early Christian women and men because his faith

was a source of hope for them, a source of encouragement as they shared the same risks and dangers.

George reminded them, as did all the martyrs, that faith in God and God's faithfulness in return are stronger than death. George, and all the martyrs were reminders - symbols - not of death, but of life through death. Reminders of what God revealed to us at Easter: that God's love is stronger than death. Nothing, not even death, separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Hope in the resurrection, hope in God's love beyond death - this hope was the daily bread of the early Christians who lived in a time of persecution, in a time when being a Christian was a matter of life and death.

And so perhaps it is no accident then that George should acquire legendary status as one who slays the dragon, who puts to death eternal death itself through faith in the Risen Christ.

George and his dragon have much to teach us too. Just as he was an inspiration of hope for his fellow Christians all those centuries ago, so too he is the same for us. We need to remember the martyrs because we need just the same faith as theirs. We are not separated from them in death. We are one with them in a shared faith.

Easter here this year was a glorious time of sun and warmth. The paschal moon was spectacularly beautiful. It wasn't hard to imagine the whole of creation joining in the Easter Alleluias as we proclaimed our faith with joy: Christ is Risen.

And yet, and at the same time, Christian men and women everywhere had to dig deep into resurrection hope when confronted by the images of death in Sri Lanka. Women and men and children, just like us, who went to church on Easter Day, went with joy and hope to proclaim their faith in Christ Risen, and who died because of their faith.

Easter reveals to us that God's answer to death is life. Sometimes we have to dig very deep into that hope and trust, just as did George our patron.

The mystery of Easter is simple: God will not let go of us, will not break faith, will not let us perish, even through death. That is the why the early Christians held fast to the memory of their martyrs. The martyrs reminded them, and us, that nothing, not even death can separate us from our life in God.

Again from Isaiah: 'Do not fear for I am with you... 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.' We like George, can trust in the God who is near to us, very near.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen.