

England's Protector

A Sermon preached on the Solemnity of S. George the Martyr, Patron of England on Monday, 2 May 2011 (by transfer) at the High Mass in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House by Father William Davage, Priest Librarian and Custodian of the Library

PATRIOTISM is not enough.”¹ Nor is patriotism the same as jingoism and it is emphatically not an indiscriminate, unqualified nationalism or xenophobia: that way madness lies. Love of country must be contingent on its values, its societal and political principles, its relationships of reciprocity between peoples and its sense of commonality and common purpose. This is decidedly so for the followers of Christ. For there is another country far beyond the stars that commands our loyalty and against which we must judge and measure the land in which we live, and that is heaven, the new, eternal and perfect Jerusalem: and its inhabitants, the saints of God, are the template of citizenship.

Little may be known definitively about S. George, the heavenly Patron of England. Probably a Roman soldier, he was never in England, had probably never heard of England but his adoption exemplifies this country's distinguished history of the assimilation and hospitality offered to the refugee, to those displaced by tyrant and despot. In the Orthodox tradition he is the “great martyr” with his deeds of heroic glory known only to God. However much his life has been embroidered with chivalric courage and romantic knightly virtue, the slaying of dragons and the courteous presentation of roses to princesses in distress, his faith and faithfulness unto death call us to a wider vision and a larger communion than the confines of this island may otherwise restrict us. He sets us within a universal context of Catholic Christendom, which is nothing less than the love of God made manifest.

And it is within that context that nations and their peoples are set, and men and women will only be contented and at ease with themselves and with others when they have found their right place in the scheme of things. Peace between nations, and peace within nations, will come only when men and women are at peace with themselves and at peace and at one with God. And it is undoubtedly true that a country cannot be at peace, people cannot be at peace with themselves, nor can a country and a people command respect or loyalty while it forgets God.

Our fellow subjects try to satisfy themselves with this world only, or they try to form this world in their own image. That can only be a futile endeavour: it cannot be done. To confine ourselves to this world means that we condemn ourselves to live in a state of permanent anxiety. We become anxious about the very nature and purpose of existence, about the absurdity of a life with no frame of reference beyond itself, born down by suffering and tragedies that undermine human rationality. Of course, it is possible to forget our cares for a time, for a little space: we may even drown our sorrows occasionally but we can never banish our anxieties if we deny our reliance on God and cease to be a Christian country.

But not only that. A Christian country is a Catholic country, with the faith woven into the fabric of society, in the weft and woof of what it is to be English, or as English as our mongrel ancestry allows. Our task, under George, our patron and protector, remains, with a greater urgency, the conversion of our country: not trying to make her strange and

¹ Edith Cavell

foreign and unfamiliar but to make her once again what she once was, Our Lady's Dowry, a holy land of saints, that which she ought to be.

As I speak those words, as I articulate those unfashionable sentiments, we must be aware, painfully conscious, that our task in the Church, never mind in the wider society and context, looks increasingly forlorn. We cannot close our eyes or stop our ears to the crisis we face as a Movement born and named in this University and city, and as individual Catholic Christians caught up in a moment of history when all we have striven for, all we believe in, both in Church and State is under threat, and threatens to turn to dust and ashes. But whatever the difficulties, and they are real; whatever the obstacles, and they are formidable; whatever the persecution, and it will intensify, we must be clear and resolute, no less resolute than our patron and protector in his time of trial. We must keep the faith, we must cherish the vision, we must persevere in our high calling and vocation. With the help of the prayers of Our Lady of Walsingham we must resolve that through no fault of ours, no lapse of ours, no negligence of ours, the high endeavour to which we are committed shall fail in this generation. Rather, we must always pursue that Catholic vision for the church and our land. And at the last, when all is over and our time is come, may the prayers of Saint George, our patron and the protector of this country and people dedicated to his honour, bring us and bring all those who do him honour to that true and perfect country, that country beyond the stars, that country which is as much ours as is this England, to the glorious and everlasting realm of the heavenly king.

"I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away ... And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ... and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them.'"²

Pusey House 2011

² The Revelation to S. John (The Apocalypse) 21: 1 – 3