

Sermon on Sunday 26 April 2026

by Rev. Bill Church

Saint George

St George's Day was last week.

My boyhood memories of that day are of parades and services by uniformed youth organisations like the Scouts.

The St George that I then had before me was a man on horseback, sometimes literally a knight in shining armour, slaying a dragon with his lance and thus both saving a princess in peril and releasing her city from the depredations of that beast.

That St George spoke of courage in facing danger and overcoming it, as well as chivalry towards women and concern for those who suffer, which are not bad messages particularly for young men.

Unfortunately, that bears little resemblance to the real St George, except that he was a soldier. The dragon killing has been imported from Michael the Archangel and from the Greek myth of Perseus. So far as we know the original George was a Roman soldier stationed at Lydda, now the port of Lod in Israel. We do not know where he came from – he could have been local and thus a Palestinian or he may have come from anywhere in

the Roman Empire. He was martyred for being a Christian around 304 in the last great persecution.

In that account, it almost sounds as if the dragon won. But it didn't, either historically because within a few years Constantine took over the Empire and tolerated, even encouraged, Christianity, nor spiritually, in the same way that evil did not win on Good Friday. And paintings of the resurrection sometimes have Jesus holding a flag with a red cross on a white ground.

That St George speaks of being cosmopolitan and of courage in standing up for belief and being willing to suffer for it, also a message for our times.

George became a popular saint from early times and is the patron saint of Georgia, Malta, Portugal etc. He became the patron saint of England as well after Crusaders brought back his story from the Holy Land and Edward the Third and the Tudors encouraged it. It is his flag of a red cross on a white background that is most commonly flown on English parish churches. It also serves as the emblem of England football teams, which seems harmless enough, and less harmlessly as a signal of exclusion from those who would be surprised and alarmed to meet the real St George.

I have pondered on the parallels between St George and our own St Alban. Both were Roman soldiers, both were martyred about the same time, both speak of courage and openness, and both are venerated far and wide. The Anglican

cathedral in Jerusalem is St George's and the Anglican cathedral in Washington DC is St Alban's.