Today is St George’s Day!.....and around St George there are many legends. There is the medieval legend that centres on an imaginary kingdom, oppressed by the threats and ravages of a menacing dragon. The dragon makes regular attacks on this kingdom, and the king must provide sacrificial victims to assuage the dragon’s appetite. This is the legend much loved of primary school children, and well known to vicars of St George’s churches up and down the country – as I know very well! The finale unfolds when the king must provide his own daughter as the latest victim, and so enters St George, who kills the dragon, rescues the princess and is rewarded with her hand in marriage from the king… not entirely suitable on a day of marking the pioneering actions of women towards equality of status and regard within the CofE!!...however…..

The other legend of St George, which arguably has some historical foundation, is more gritty. It dates from the days of the Roman Empire, and tells of a soldier, George who was potentially Palestinian, or possibly Syrian or Turkish. He is a Christian and is conscripted into the Roman army. It is however an inauspicious time, for the Christian community is being suppressed savagely under the persecution of Diocletian. The story goes that George was required to participate actively in suppressing his fellow Christians, but he refused. This led to his court martial and martyrdom, possibly in the city of Lydda around the year 304. George stands, therefore, as a fine example of championing the cause of the Christian church of the time, and indeed championing the cause of minority communities everywhere.

Many of you will know that yesterday was Stephen Lawrence Day, which has been kept since 2019, and serves as a sharp reminder of the threats that have attached, and are sometimes still connected with being black, Asian or not white in British society. Stephen was murdered violently by a bus stop in Eltham, by a group of white boys in 1993. You may also have seen recently a documentary series on Channel 4 ‘Defiance: Fighting the Far Right’ about the violent racism experienced by Asian people in Britian in the 1970s and 80s, particularly in Southall and Brick Lane, including the murder of another young person, eighteen year old Gurdip Singh Chaggar. These parts of our recent history do us no credit at all. As a response to the negative impacts of racism, the Stephen Lawrence Foundation works hard to support, equip and empower young people to achieve their life aspirations.

So, what, you might ask, is the connection between the legends of St George, Stephen Lawrence and Gurdip Singh Chagar and racist violence? And today I want to suggest just one thing, which is the theme of ‘otherness’. Racism, probably in all its forms, gets much of its traction from the othering of others. Only if someone, or a group of people, has become an ‘other’ – from being misunderstood, to being mistrusted, to being feared to being despised, is it possible to do violence to them. And yet in our imaginations and perceptions, we both create and sustain pictures or images of ‘others’. In order to secure our own identities, this involves understanding ourselves as over against others. But the point, perhaps, is that the natural othering of others does not mean that others have to become enemies. For me to be who I am, does not need to be at the expense of you being who you are, if you are other than me….and still less is it the case that me being who I am should require that all others need to be eliminated. What a world we would be living in if either of these things were the case. Manifestly, there are ways of me being me and AN OTHER being themselves that don’t require the demonisation of others. From scripture, that all are made in the image of God, secures the fact that the intention for our co-habitation in this world is for differences to be embraced, and that we might learn to accommodate them and even rejoice in them.

What the legend of St George presents us with, arguably in both its forms, is a narrative or an enactment of the struggle with the harmful, even violent impacts of the most destructive forms of the othering of others. In George and the dragon, it’s George versus the dragon, who is the mistrusted, feared and hated other. And the question we must ask is, ‘how is this radical othering to be resolved’? Well, in many an icon or statue of St George and the dragon, George has a huge sword and is piercing the dragon’s side – this is one answer to the question, to kill the other. And many a primary school child (usually a boy!) has relished enacting the sharp thrust of the sword to finish off the dragon and rid the kingdom of this menace. However, this ending is not inevitable. There are many versions of the story that end NOT with the dragon meeting a violent end, but with George leading the dragon back into town with the two of them walking calmly together hand in hand. These versions demonstrate that ‘the other’ does not need to be sustained as an enemy – does not have to be killed off – but can actually become an ally, even a friend. And very clearly, what these versions of the story offer us is the splendid hope of overcoming the threats and fears associated with otherness. We know only too well that when the othering of others reaches fever pitch, terrible things happen. We’ve seen enough of this recently to last us a lifetime. I am most of the way through reading Jeremy Bowen’s book the Making of the Modern Middle East (which I recommend highly) and it is a woeful tale of the consequences of unresolved othering. All of us, however, will have witnessed, I trust, the converse, i.e. ‘others’ becoming friends. It may even have happened to us. It is of course a gospel value, and one that comes from Jesus himself.

So, thankful for the example of St George, and mindful of our brothers Stephen Lawrence, Gurdip Singh Chaggar, George Floyd and, very sadly, many others – and mindful too of divisions that are capable of unseating us in our church today – let’s pray for the grace to never allow the othering of others to become a platform for hatred and mistrust; and let’s pray that wherever we do find ourselves at odds with any ‘others’, where we have made enemies out of each other, that we may learn how to leave room for the work of grace, whereby enemies can become friends and ‘others’ can become known and loved as neighbours like ourselves.

Venerable Julian Francis

23rd April 2024