



Archbishop Stephen's address at the 2023 Scouting & Guiding Celebration, St George's & Founders' Day Celebration at York Minster:

Scouting played a big part in my childhood and upbringing. My father was a Cub master. We have a lovely old family photo of him and my mum emerging from church on their wedding day flanked on either side by rows of cubs.

I was a Cub Scout and a Sea Scout myself. In my early teenage years, many a weekend was spent on scouting activities, and, of course, the annual scout camp.

My mother was a Girl Guide leader for a time, and actually, not having been brought up as a churchgoer, my first real introduction to church was through church parade services, which, in my day were once a month. In fact, my sister, a Guide, so enjoyed what she found at the 'once a month, church parade services' that she and a small group of friends started going on the other Sundays in between, got confirmed, and joined the church, and this was the catalyst for my becoming part of the church myself - though, I'm not quite sure this was all down to scouting, since I did rather fancy one of my sister's friends, and since joining the Girl Guides to get to know her wasn't an option at the time (though I'm now aware that girls and boys do join together in the scouts) I took myself off to church, and also to the youth club on Sunday evenings.

Church became part of my life.

Jesus became someone to follow - someone who showed me what being human, being alive, is meant to be like; and although I'm not sure I made the connection at the time, I can see now that Baden Powell and the others who started the Scout movement also knew and saw this connection; that the Scout motto, 'be prepared', was about being prepared for the whole of life, not just the obvious things that scouting gives you – and, as I say, I did enjoy and benefit hugely from this in my own growing up – but being prepared in our inner life, and having the spiritual resources to help face life's difficulties, challenges, sorrows and fears; even, one day, death itself.

And the Scout promise that I made, to do duty to God and the King – well, the Queen in my day - enfolds in a single promise our duties to one another within the life of our nation, and our duties to the world, and all our neighbours across the world, because to believe and honour God is to declare an accountability and a belonging to one another: one human family inhabiting one world.

And of course, Scouting itself has become a worldwide organisation, and a force for good in many nations.

Today is St George's Day, the Patron Saint of England, but also, interestingly, and not so very well known, St George was a refugee. And not English at all.

So how did he become our patron saint? And what does he have to say to us today?

St George was a Palestinian Christian. But he was born in Turkey around A.D.270 and after his father died for his faith during one of the persecutions of Christianity, he and his mother fled to Palestine.

He served in the Roman army but in the year 303, and during one of the most brutal persecutions of the church, under the Emperor Diocletian, he too was killed for refusing to renounce his Christian faith.

Because of his brave and unapologetic affirmation of faith, George has always been revered by Christians in the east, and also by many Muslims, who admired his bravery, his faithfulness, and his tenacity.

And it was for these same reasons that English Crusaders to the Holy land (Palestine) adopted George as a patron, and later King Edward III made him patron saint of England. And although he never visited this country, and although all this was a long time ago, I think he still has much of relevance to say to us today.

In a world where people are still persecuted for their beliefs, St George speaks of bravery and courage.

In a world where Christians were a tiny minority, St George speaks of tenacious faithfulness, and invites us to confront prejudice.

In a world where people were expected to question the status quo, St George stands out for truth and witness in the public square.

In a world where thousands of people still flee conflict and persecution, St George reminds us of our responsibilities to the excluded, the powerless, the exiled, and the despised.

And in England today, where we could easily and unthinkingly assume that because he's our patron saint he must be English, it is helpful to be reminded that he was Palestinian and of Turkish origin, was a refugee himself, and died under persecution because he wasn't prepared to denounce his faith or turn his back on what he believed in. He can therefore be a great example to us in our multicultural and multifaith society, and especially to Scouts and Guides who are also called to serve God and serve their nation and serve the world.

St George encourages us to speak up for the values of generosity, faithfulness, tolerance, devotion to duty, and the pursuit of justice, not least for refugees, in Britain today.

He may not have slayed actual dragons – the thing we most likely remember him for – but he can inspire us to slay the dragons of prejudice, injustice, selfishness and greed, things which too easily take hold of the human heart and for which St George, the Scout and Guide Association, and the Christian faith stand against. For in this great endeavour, and with St George himself, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and are called to persevere in the race that is set before us.

Amen



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