

## Easter III (17 April 2016)

“Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.”

+In the Name...

In one of my favorite movies, David Tomlinson, playing the part of George Banks, says, or rather sings, to Julie Andrews, playing the part of Mary Poppins, “life’s a looming battle to be faced and fought.” Rather serious and inhospitable words for a Disney classic that is considered a family staple. Mr. Banks is concerned about the ways in which his children spend their days; outings and pastimes that seem frivolous to him and do nothing to prepare his children for the real world.

I do not think I have mentioned it yet this year, but the Epistles that are read during the Sundays of Easter were chosen by those who created the lectionary for the newly baptized, those who were made members of the Church at the Great Vigil of Easter. In smaller parishes where we do not have many baptisms, it is easy to forget that Easter is one of the traditional times for new members to be baptized. It is all too easy for new members of the Church to think that once they have joined and are “card-carrying members” things will always be wonderful. Wouldn’t it be nice if somehow the Sacraments clothed us with an invisible force field protecting us from everything evil?

St. Peter knew that things were not always that way, and so we are interrupted in this lovely Eastertide by a somewhat jarring entrance into this morning’s epistle: “abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul;” Doesn’t it kind of leave you asking, “Where did that come from?” Fleshly lusts are a perennial problem for members of Holy Mother Church. It is no coincidence that members of the clergy traditionally had to take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, because three of the most common temptations were money, sex and power. But whether the battles in your life are associated with fleshly lusts or something else entirely, you will have them, and you will continue to have them.

I was considering telling you of a particular battle in my life, but decided the details are not necessary for this sermon, and what's more, the situation probably pales in comparison to some of your own battles. But let's say that after a particular lousy patch of time in my life, my mother said to my wife, not when I was around, "Things used to always go well for Chad, but they don't seem to anymore." I cannot remember if Danielle said she had a response. What can one say? Becoming a Christian is not a "get out of jail free card", or perhaps a better way to word it is it is not a "get out of jail without some bumps and bruises along the way" card.

Peter knew there would be at least two kinds of foes we faced in our earthly battles: the spiritual kind that would tempt us and cause us to have "fleshly lusts" that would kill our very souls. But there were also the kinds of foes that would kill our physical beings, or at least challenge them a great deal: namely the government and our fellow human beings. It leaves us with this kind of odd juxtaposition in this morning's epistle of "stay chaste" and "do what the government tells you." "Good enough advice in general," you may think to yourself, but not two subjects you would necessarily put in the same paragraph or selection to be read at church on Sunday morning.

Perhaps it is fitting that this Saturday we celebrate the feast of St. George. George is famous, of course, for being the patron saint of England. George was born in what is now Syria, and scholars doubt that he ever travelled to or had anything to do with the British Isles, but nevertheless he is the patron saint of the English, and has devoted followers in many other countries as well. George is equally famous for slaying a dragon. Hmmm, a dragon. What are we to make of that idea? When my daughter tells me there is a dragon in her bedroom closet, I tell her there are no such things as dragons. The Golden Legend tells us that there was a town where a dragon guarded the spring from which the town got its water. In order to appease the dragon, the townspeople would offer it a sheep. When no sheep could be found, they would offer a virgin, who was chosen by drawing lots. One year the town was fresh out of sheep, and apparently short on virgins, because the princess drew

the short straw. Fortunately for the royal family, St. George swooped in at the nick of time, slayed the dragon, saved the princess, and converted the townspeople to Christianity. Not bad for a day's work.

Unfortunately for St. George, that was not the worst of what the devil had in store for him. George lived in a time when being a Christian was not conducive to being financially or politically successful. (Thankfully nothing like our own day!) George was born in 280 to Christian parents. His father was also an officer in the Roman army. When George presented himself to Diocletian with the hope of beginning a military career, the latter welcomed him with open arms on account of his father's fine reputation. Diocletian made George a tribune and he served as an imperial guard. Everything went well for George until 303 when Diocletian issued an edict requiring every Christian in the army to offer a sacrifice to the Roman gods; the only alternative being death. George refused. Diocletian was not anxious to lose his best tribune or the son of one of his best officers, so he tried to negotiate with George. First he tried to convert George, but when that tactic proved to be futile, he tried to offer George land, money, anything to get him to offer the obligatory sacrifice. When George still steadfastly refused, Diocletian, unwilling to relent on his edict, had George decapitated.

I doubt very much that it is a coincidence that in Christian mythology George slayed a dragon, and Satan is often depicted in Christian art as snake, reptile or some other similar creature. Saint George was able to destroy the dragon that was in his inner life; that which tempted him without notice of those around him. It makes Satan angry when we do not follow his wishes for us. It made him angry then. So Satan turned to the state for assistance! Who could have guessed...? But even here in Washington, DC, the pulpit is not the place merely to criticize the State. In fact, our words from St. Peter indicate just the opposite: "submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." George took that more literally than we would likely want. He was loyal to his earthly superior until it conflicted with being loyal to his heavenly superior. Satan went after George because he was getting in his way. Satan knows how everything turns out in the end, but his arrogance

keeps him from realizing that he is ultimately powerless to change it. So he continues to inflict as much damage as he can on those who are the biggest threat to him. He did it to St. George. He has done it to the newly baptized. I have no doubt he has done it to each and every one of you at one time or another. In a sense we should take it as a compliment because he would not waste his time with us if we were not standing in opposition to his goal of expanding his empire. Knowing Satan's game puts us in a better place. Strengthening ourselves with the Sacraments, prayer, and the reading of Scripture is the spiritual equivalent of going to boot camp and then donning our suit of armor.

Yes, Mr. Banks, life is a looming battle to be faced and fought. And we thank the Lord for George and all of the many saints and worthies who have given us Godly examples of how to fight the battle throughout that life. Saint George, intercede for us.

+In the Name...