

**Sermon preached at the Annual Gathering of the British Friends of St George's College, Jerusalem,
Heythrop College, Kensington Square, London W8 5HN
Thursday 8 May 2014
by the Secretary of the British Regional Committee, the Revd Paul Conder**

"The cultured despisers" as Friedrich Schleiermacher called them, have been at it again recently, attacking Christianity and labelling the Church as "divisive", "harmful to society" and, rather illogically, protesting that ours is not a Christian country anyway. Those who have leapt to the defence of the Christian faith might not be so concerned if they bore in mind our Lord's warning to "beware when all men speak well of you". CS Lewis in the Screwtape letters reminds us that the powers of evil do not waste their powder and shot on adversaries whom they do not view as a threat. God is not diminished by fluctuations in the numbers of those who happen to believe in Him at any given moment.

What I really want to speak about today is the reality of God's love as revealed in His Word becoming flesh, breaking into His World and showing Himself in Jesus Christ.

My most vivid experience of this was as a student on my first day in Galilee in 1957, watching the sun come climbing over the Syrian hills at about 5.30am and realising the Jesus must have shared the very same experience countless times, employing the same human processes of vision as our own. That brought the significance of the Incarnation home to me as never before. Those hills haven't changed much in two thousand years and the Sea of Galilee is still there – even if in declining volume!

This has always been one of the aims of St George's College: to make our Lord real, emotionally, intellectually, academically and spiritually, so that those fortunate enough to attend its courses have seen their lives changed through personal encounters with the living Lord.

Anglicanism has been described as the Research and Development Unit of the Catholic Church, and St George's surely has a significant part to play in this enterprise. Archaeology, geography, history, mythology, literature, art and religion are presented through the media of lectures, travel, worship, reading and conversation. Securely based at the Cathedral, course participants experience the more exotic liturgies of ancient places of worship belonging to Armenians, Copts, Ethiopians, Greeks, Latins, Russians, Romanians and Syrians – which make the Catholics appear positively Protestant by comparison. John Taylor, the former Bishop of St Albans, who was our preacher last year, himself spent a year as a research student at the Hebrew University. He averred that a fortnight in the Holy Land was worth a year at any Bible College.

Drawing closer to Christ has, of course, been the aim of pilgrimage throughout the centuries from Helena to Egeria to Evdokia to Brother Felix in the 16th Century or the Russians about whom I wrote in the current Update magazine.

Perhaps inevitably there have, from time to time, been nay-sayers and it was a St George's course which introduced me to some of these. The Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa was sent to inspect the church in Jerusalem in 379AD to do a sort of "Ofsted" on it. He was far from impressed.

The local inhabitants did not set a good example. “There is no form of filth they do not practise,” he thunders. “Cheating, thieving, idol worshipping, poisoning, quarrelling, murder. Nowhere else in the world are people so ready to kill each other.” “Our faith was not any greater afterwards, nor less either,” he continues. “Our own holy places are far holier than places abroad. Going from place to place does not bring you nearer God.” This is some consolation to those who, for various reasons, are unable to embark on the long and demanding journeys involved, even in these days of air travel.

Jerome also sought to discourage ascetics from undertaking a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. “There is little room,” he wrote, “for the historical claims of the Holy Places. The important thing is to carry in your own heart the Cross, the resurrection, the place of Christ’s nativity and ascension.” We do well to heed his warning.

Yet, speaking personally, after 57 years’ association with the Land and the College, I feel, as I’m sure many of you do too, that I owe such a debt to St George’s for opening my eyes to so many things:

- the Jewishness of Jesus and the roots of our Faith
- the common heritage of the three great monotheistic religions as exemplified, for example, in the Ninety Nine Names of God (I’ve still got the course hand-out!)
- Biblical scenes brought vividly to life through in situ presentation by staff members (a rich treasure house to draw on in future teaching)
- getting to see places other tours don’t reach, such as Dan, Chorazin, Gamla, the Negev, Sepphoris.
- Opportunities for worldwide friendships
- A deeper understanding of the contemporary political and religious situation through personal contact with the people of the land
- Ecumenical possibilities, such as being invited by a Roman Catholic priest from Hawaii to concelebrate with him at the altar in Abu Ghosh church
- International encounters, demonstrating that there is more than one way of doing things
- Chief of all, the opportunity for falling in love with Jesus again. Is not this what our religion is about? Yet how often our time and energies are consumed by secondary issues – women bishops, gay marriage, keeping the show on the road, as depicted so depressingly and realistically in the recent TV series, “Rev”.

After His resurrection Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” Not, “What do you believe about me?” Not, “How doctrinally pure are you?” This must be our priority, whether ordained or lay: to experience and proclaim, with St Paul, the Son of God, “who loved me and gave Himself for me”.

Which is what this great resource we call St George’s College is supremely well placed to do.

The earlier on in life one can discover this resource the better - hence your Committee’s current emphasis on scholarships for ordinands and those in the early stages of ministry. This is a critical time for the BRC – a time of change, a time of challenge, a time of new opportunities and new directions. For instance, what is the purpose of this Annual Gathering? Should it not be more than just a reunion of old friends and colleagues, valuable and enjoyable as that is?

Bishop Robin Smith often spoke about St George's as being the best-kept secret in the Anglican Communion – an accolade of questionable merit, you may think! How is that to be rectified? How can we make the College better known, more accessible? This is the major challenge facing all of us who love St George's today. It calls for continuing persistent and fervent prayer.
Amen.