

# Sermon XIII: In Praise of St. George

## St. Peter Damian

*St. Peter Damian (1007—1072), Bishop, Confessor, and Doctor of the Church, was known for his sharp intellect and deep asceticism. While he tried to live out a life of penance and austerity as a Benedictine monk, his ability to resolve both ecclesiastical and civil conflict constantly drew him out of his monastic enclosure. In his sermon on St. George, his patristic prowess is on full display. Constantly drawing on military language, he moves from agrarian metaphors and launches into a fully-fledged interpretation of the waters and dry land of Genesis, and throughout the Scriptures, as a type of the just and the reprobate. He concludes with an interpretation of the levitical vestments and a call to imitate this great martyr.*

**T**ODAY'S FEAST, dearly beloved, is joined with the joy of the Paschal glory, and like a precious gem within a gold setting, it shines with the beauty of its own splendor. It is undoubtedly fitting that it was granted to St. George to triumph at this particular time, when, having passed through the harshness of winter storms, having been dispelled by the south wind's kindling, the happy earth joyfully gives birth with the bursting forth of various herbs and flowering trees, as if it were a young man, so to speak, in the prime of his youth. While it is Greek, *George* sounds in Latin like a *cultivator of the earth*, who without a doubt, in accordance with the foreshadowing of his name, not only cultivated the field of his mind by the disciplines of spiritual exercise, but also by the plowshare of holy exhortation and pious rebuke furrowed the land of many hearts, plucking out the briars of vice and planting in them the fruitful trees of virtue.

Rightly then does the soul of this blessed Martyr today, after the bloody rage of a mad ruler, after the savage cruelty of the executioner, after the exquisite suffering of his torn body, after the unjust tortures of fire, iron, pitch, and sulphur, after the scourging and gashes, after the darkness of prisons, as after the raging winds of winter and storms of snow, merit to hear this prophecy of divine calling: *Come, it says, my dove, my spouse, my beautiful one; winter is now past, the rain is over and gone: the flowers have appeared in our land, the time of pruning is come.* Clearly he was transferred from one soldiery to another, for the earthly commission from which he was discharged was exchanged for the service of a

Christian soldier; and, like a truly valiant soldier, having first bestowed all that he had upon the poor, he cast off the burden of earthly provisions. Thus free and unencumbered, and girded with the breastplate of faith, the warrior for Christ fervently plunged himself into the thick line of battle—that is, maintaining the proper order, that he first lay aside the weight of *things*, and thus afterwards rush fearlessly into the field of battle.

*rerum  
pondus*

Deut 20

Whence it is that it is enjoined by the Law that a fearful and fainthearted man should not go out to war, but should go, it says, and return to his land lest he cause the hearts of his brethren to fear, as he himself is terrified. With these words we are clearly instructed that those who are still afraid of being stripped of earthly riches are unable to fight manfully and fitly for the defense of the Faith, and it is more tolerable that, returning home in a certain way, they should live ignominiously and basely, rather than turn themselves and others away from the glory of triumph by degenerate examples of fear.

But the blessed George, inflamed with the fire of the Holy Ghost, and unconquerably fortified by the banner of the Cross, engaged with the unjust King, that he might in this henchman defeat the prince of all iniquity, and incite the souls of Christ's soldiers to act bravely. And indeed Diocletian was then Emperor, as is found in the description of his passion, whose mouth, according to the Psalmist, was full of cursing, and bitterness, and under his tongue labor and sorrow, who sat in ambush with the rich in private places, that he may kill the innocent, lying in wait like a lion in his den, first putting on the sly garment of the sheep, and thus tried to persuade him by a certain art of cunning, and by disguised hues of flattery. But when the renowned athlete of Christ despised the poison frothing at the mouth of the ancient serpent, and no longer showed his origin in the first parents, but rather the honorable appellation of fruitfulness living in him, immediately the savage wolf that was hiding appeared like an arrow drawn from the quiver of Satan, and the bloody beast lethally burst forth to inflict various punishments. The blessed Martyr was then gathered up by the executioners, stretched out, and buffeted with scourges and torn to pieces with severe blows. After this, a wheel equipped with swords was brought in, so that, being bound to it, the body of the Martyr was numerously pierced all the more cruelly. The savagery of the craftsman, of course, finds new and

Psalm 9

exquisite means for punishments, and to satisfy the fury of his madness he philosophizes about exceeding the measure of human cruelty, evidently not knowing that the illustrious splendor of the precious pearl, the living stone which is surely to be placed in the New Jerusalem, the more it is polished with the roughness of a file, or the blow of a hammer, is rendered all the more brilliant.

There was plainly present a supreme and invisible Arbiter under Whose discretion the hands of the wicked would be allowed to rage, and thence He would preserve His gem inviolable by the blamelessness of its own solidity. Who, even if He delivered the limbs of His Martyr into the hands of the executioner, still kept his soul supported by the impenetrable stronghold of Faith, with the indefatigable rampart of His protection. Nor did He permit them to touch that which was hidden, only exposing to them that which was outwardly visible: and like the waters of the Flood, they indeed flowed around the ark on all sides, and yet they could not penetrate into the interior.

Then let St. George say: *If it had not been that the Lord was with us, when men rose up against us, perhaps they had swallowed us up alive: when their fury was enkindled against us, perhaps they had swallowed us up like water.* These are indeed the waters of which the Savior says through the Psalmist: *Save me, O Lord, for the waters are come in even unto my soul.* And through Jonas: *Thou hast cast me forth, he says, into the deep in the heart of the sea, and a flood hath compassed me: all thy billows, and thy waves have passed over me.* But around these waters and seas, according to the Scriptures, the Lord has set a boundary: because according to the measure of his discretion, and not according to the lust of human passion, he suffers the reprobate to ravage his elect.

It is for this reason that God divided the sea from the dry land at the foundation of the world. For what is suggested by the mystery of the sea, if not reprobate men and unbelievers, who doubtless are clever by the saltiness of a certain carnal ability, but are found always to love one another through hatred and dissension, and swell like a sea with various blasts of temptation, and are tossed by storms and tempests of carnal desires? And what is the dry land, if it does not denote the soul thirsting for the fountain of faith, or panting for its Creator with ardent desire as with a parched throat? Whence also a certain soul, happily parched by this thirst, cried out writhing in the heat: *My soul hath thirsted after the living God; when shall I come and appear before the face of God?* The sea is divided from the dry land, therefore, when almighty God restrains the attacks of the reprobate against those who thirst after Him, and like the waves of the sea, tosses them against the shore while He fixes the limits of moderation to his seething madness. Which indeed the voice of God proves, when He says, *Who shut up the sea with doors, when it broke forth as issuing out of the womb?* And a little later: *I set my bounds around it, and made it bars and doors, and I said: Hitherto thou shalt come, and*

*shalt go no further, and here thou shalt break thy swelling waves.* For indeed the heart of a wicked man is rightly represented by the sea, clearly wild with fury, swelling with bitter quarrels and the exaltation of pride, and gloomy with the darkness of malicious deceit. Then God separated the sea and checked the threatening waves from flooding the earth, so that the earth would sprout green herbs and fruiting trees, and then yield a crop of fruit. Even now he separates the pursuing whirlwinds of the wicked from his elect, and checks them as the raging attacks of a storm, which he permits to rage even to the point of inflicting bodily tortures: yet lest they should injure souls, he protects them, and guards them with the shelter of his unresting arm, in a manner saying to the sea: *You will come this far, and go no further, and here you will break your swelling waves: as if He says, I mitigate your tortures, even to the point of bodily infliction; but lest you flow up to the soul with swelling heaps, I set the shore of My law against you, so that while the shore is beaten with the fury of your waves, the earth of the heart may be left free to bring forth the seeds of fruit.*

And since George, as we said above, is interpreted a *tiller of the earth*, the mystery of this allegorical figure is rightly ascribed to the same Blessed Martyr. To whom, of course, even if the waves of persecution had broken up to the shore of the flesh, yet the most solid ground of his soul was not enveloped by the gale of the tempestuous whirlwind; and he was not swallowed up by the raging sea, who fixed the anchor of his hope not in the crumbling sand, but in the solidity of the rock which is Christ. Hence it is surely that Truth says: *He who beareth My words and does them, shall be likened to a wise man that built his house upon a rock. The floods came, and the winds blew, and they beat upon that house, and it fell not, for it was founded on a rock.* This truly distinguished soldier of Christ laid the foundations of his faith upon the rock, who, with a view of the heavenly reward, spurned the threats of princes, laughed at the promises of evil flatterers, despised the executioner's tortures, iron, fire, swords, and trampled on divers punishments with the majesty of invincible patience.

Let us not only admire this warrior of the heavenly army, dearest brothers, but also imitate him; the spirit is already raised to that heavenly reward of glory, and while we fix our hearts in contemplation of him, let it not be moved, whether the world smiles as a flatterer, or certainly roars with threatening adversities, saying with the Psalmist: *The darkness thereof, and the light thereof are alike to thee.* Let us therefore cleanse ourselves, according to Paul's teaching, from all defilement of flesh and spirit; that we may someday merit to enter into that temple of blessedness to which we now turn our mental steel. Hence it is that Aaron first washes himself with water, and so afterwards enters the tabernacle to sacrifice, concerning which the Divine Voice deemed it meet to command Moses: *He shall be vested with a tunic, he shall cover his nakedness with linen breeches: he shall be girded with a linen girdle, and he shall put a linen mitre upon his head:*

Gen 7

Psalm 103

Psalm 18

Jonas 2

Psalm 103

Gen 1

Psalm 41

Job 38

ibid.

1 Cor 10  
Matt 7  
Luke 6

Psalm 138

2 Cor 7

Exod 32, 29

Lev 6, 26

*for these are holy vestments: which he shall put on, after he is washed.* For whoever contends to sacrifice himself to God in the tabernacle of Christ, which is the Church, it is necessary that, after he has been cleansed in the baptism of the sacred font, he should also be clothed with the divers garments of virtue, as it is written: *Let thy priests be clothed with justice;* inasmuch as he who is reborn a new man in Christ through baptism no longer wears leather cloaks, namely the signs of mortality, but laying aside the old man, puts on the new, and lives in this garment renewed by the zeal of clean conduct. And it is to be noted that all those clothes are described as being of linen, for linen is made white by toil, and the life of virtue is not acquired under the torpor of idleness, but rather in the laborious exercise of discipline.

Psalm 131

Purified therefore, dearly beloved, by the new sacrament of baptism, let us put on the tunic of linen, that the whiteness of holy conduct may adorn us. They are to be covered with the breeches, so that while the cover of an honorable life is assumed, the shame of past crimes is hidden before the eyes of God. Whence David: *Blessed, he says, are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.* Let us furthermore tighten the girdle, and also put the mitre on our head, so that having girded the loins of the mind with truth, we may be protected by the helmet of the hope of salvation. Thus, cleansed of the squalor of old sin, and illustrious with the splendor of new conduct, we celebrate the Paschal mystery with dignity, and we truly imitate the example of the Blessed Martyrs.

Psalm 31

And do not despair, my brothers, although you are still weak, although you are perhaps still entwined in external

actions, do not despair of belonging to the company of the Martyrs, you who from the heart lovingly call to mind the victories of the Martyrs. Indeed, five daughters of Salphaad are known among their brothers as heirs, having obtained their portion according to the decree of Moses. Namely, there are five women, so that through the number five, external occupation is designated, while through the feminine gender, fragility is indicated. Jonathan, too, being placed in a sort of middle ground between the two of them, neither remained with Saul in evil, nor could be completely equal with David in good. But because he was a friend of the beloved Prophet of God, and rejoiced at his future success with fraternal kindness, it is piously believed that he is not now divided in spirit from his fellowship, to whom, while he lived in the flesh, he existed united in love.

Num 27, 36

1 King 18-20

But we, dearly beloved, who with the help of God have driven back the evil spirit that was harassing Saul; yes, we who escaped Pharaoh's army, drowned in the Red Sea, through the power of the Paschal sacrament, yet because of the weakness of the flesh we are still wandering in the wilderness, let us pass over to the completion of life, that is, to the land flowing with milk and honey. Having come out of Sodom, let us tarry no longer in Segor, but freed with Lot, let us ascend the top of the mountain quickly; inasmuch as those who, in the very rudiments of training, have already begun to exult in the triumphs of the blessed Martyrs, let us, too, advance even to this: that we ourselves may learn to triumph with the the Saints. And let Him be our strength while He protects and redeems, Who became the ransom, Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reins with God the Father and the Holy Ghost unto the ages of ages. Amen.

1 King 16

Exod 18

Gen 19