

SERMON

"ST GEORGE AND THE DRAGON"

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If you think of St George, what is the image, the picture, that you have? For most people, the mention of the name of St George conjures up a picture of a brave, handsome knight, in shining plate armour of mediaeval vintage: dealing the death blow to a fearsome, fire-breathing dragon, while a beautiful young woman hovers in the background, full of gratitude and admiration, perhaps also of love, for the gallant hero who has saved her from being killed by the monstrous dragon. Sometimes he is on horseback, using a full-sized lance - the sort of thing used in jousting tournaments, but with a proper sharp point on it, not a blunt end. Sometimes he is on foot, getting in close to deliver the *coup de grace* - the final slash - with a bright straight sword.

The details vary, but most of the common features are recognisably present in most representations: the shining armour; the dragon about to be despatched; the beautiful young woman; the air of gallantry, chivalry, nobility; the victory of good over evil; the Christian Church; the national essence of England.

Once upon a time -and perhaps not all that long ago - many people believed that, if England faced dire peril - if the nation was in great danger - King Arthur (that's King Arthur of the Round Table) would return to deliver the nation and save its people. Some people pretty much believe that he did in fact return, in the person of Winston Churchill, who was Prime Minister for much of the Second World War and who has sometimes been described as leading the nation (or even leading the Allies) to victory.

In earlier times, people thought much the same about Admiral Horatio Nelson or the Duke of Wellington, in the face of the threat from Napoleon Bonaparte.

Or, before them, in the late 16th century, they thought much the same about Sir Francis Drake, 'defeating the Spanish Armada which had developed an awesome reputation of invincibility.

Drake died more than 400 hundred years ago. He died at sea off the island of Nombre de Dios, in the West Indies, in 1596. His drum, used for signalling orders to the crew, was taken back to his home at Buckland Abbey.

Four hundred years ago, of course, there were no modern methods of communication: no radio, no radar, no satellites, no Morse code, no telegraph, no flashing lights. They used flags for visual signals; and flags are still used at sea. But flags up on masts and rigging weren't much good to crew members down below, in the gun decks. Imagine them having to go up to see whether - or when - the order to fire had been given.

A lot of orders were given by voice: the bosun or mate did a lot of shouting, to pass on the orders of the officers. But that could get pretty tiring, especially in the middle of a battle. Another way of giving orders or signals was by using a drum, to beat out signals in a kind of code. It seems pretty primitive, compared with our high-tech communication systems, but it worked. And that was the system Sir Francis Drake used.

Drake is one of the great heroes of England's naval history. After his death, a legend grew up that, whenever England was in national danger, his drum would sound, as it sounded when he led the English navy to victory against the invading Spanish Armada.

As a boy in South Australia, many years ago now, I grew up knowing that story. Sir Henry Newbolt wrote a poem which expressed the legend. The poem became something of a standard in anthologies for schools, particularly in sections on heroism, or seamanship, or warfare, or patriotism. When I taught English in secondary schools it was sometimes part of the poetry course. In particular, it was published in an anthology called Poems of Spirit and Action, in the section The Sea.

In the poem, Drake is represented as saying:

Take my drum to England, hang et by the shore,
Strike et when your powder's runnin' low; If the
Dons sight Devon, I 'll quit the port o'
Heaven,
An' drum them up the Channel as we drummed them
long ago.

King Arthur. Francis Drake. Horatio Nelson. Wellington.
Heroes who appeared in times of national danger. When a
dragon appears, a St George is needed to slay it.

This sort of belief is not confined to England alone. Other nations have had similar beliefs. The ancient Hebrews had their David, of whose line the Messiah was to be born. John the Baptist was thought of as Elijah come again - like an Arthur in time of need, or a St George come to slay some new dragon. This sort of hope, springing eternally in the human breast, seems to be part of being human.

St George was adopted as England's patron saint quite a long time ago: in the 14th century. That's where we get the bit about the shining plate armour, and all the business about chivalry.

Since then, he has appeared in all sorts of ways and places. He used to be on British twenty pound notes - a cartoon character, but recognisably slaying his dragon.. (People rarely talk about him "killing" the dragon: the word "slay" is usually the word used for it.) He appears on the Order of the Garter, one of the highest Orders of British chivalry. Ninety years ago, in the 1932/33 "Bodyline" tour of Australia, he was on the blazers of the MMC Cricket team.

I suppose that was because he was thought to represent the "Spirit" of England. I don't know whether anyone consciously thought of the Australians as dragons. Certainly the dragon is not part of the Australian legend.

About thirty years ago, in Sheffield, there was a special show on St George and the Dragon at the Ruskin Gallery, just opposite Upper chapel. There were lots of different exhibits in the show, but the cutest was a Sicilian mule cart, with St George painted on 'part of the side or back' of the cart. The Keeper of the Ruskin Gallery, Mrs Janet Barnes, said at the time that it was found in an Italian restaurant in St Albans, and that it had probably been done in the early part of the century.

It was appropriate that the St George and the Dragon exhibition was in the Ruskin Gallery. The Gallery is named after John Ruskin, the great Victorian social reformer, who associated the idea of St George fighting the dragon with his own activities, fighting the way that England was becoming increasingly industrialised. Ruskin saw industrialisation as destroying society at its very heart.

Ruskin set up a Guild of St George - and much of that exhibition thirty years ago came from the Guild's collection.

As an indication of St George's wide appeal across national borders and through the ages, the exhibition included Ancient Greek coins, Byzantine icons, the 1932 MCC cricketer's blazer, with its Eton tailor's label,

and 16th century "pilgrim badges". Janet Barnes said about those badges that "people brought them home to prove they'd been to particular shrines. ... They were the 16th century equivalent of car stickers."

There was a Book of Saints' Days, from which the term "red letter day" comes - because the most important saints were entered in red - except for a few really, really, supremely important saints, who were entered in gold, but we don't use the term "gold letter day").

There was also a George V Silver Jubilee crown (coin, not hat), with St George pictured ramrod-straight in the saddle and looking "very Brave New World". The king, George V, glanced at it and sniffed: "A damned bad rider!"

If you go to Conisborough, and go to St Peter's Church there, you can find St George on a 12th century tombstone in the church graveyard.

So, he was already around in the 12th century, before he was adopted as England's patron saint in the 14th century. But his story goes back a lot further than that. It goes back to the third century. George (he wasn't a saint yet - that came later) George was a military commander. He was also a Christian. He was ordered to make sacrifices to pagan gods, but refused to do so because of his Christian beliefs. When he continued his refusal, he was martyred.

That's a word that means "put to death because of his beliefs" - but it often also means "put to death in an unpleasant and painful way".

That was certainly the case for George. In an article in Sheffield's The Star about the Ruskin Gallery exhibition, Stephen McClarence wrote: "No expense was spared at the martyrdom. It ran to 12 separate tortures, seven miracles, three resurrections and a final grand decapitation. They don't martyr them like that any more."

So, George became a saint following his gruesome martyrdom for his faith at the end of the third century. But it wasn't until nearly a thousand years later that the dragon got into the picture with George. And it was in a different country: Libya.

The story is familiar: A Libyan dragon gets tired of its diet of sheep, and turns to children. No one is able to resist the dragon; its demands increase, until a princess - the beautiful daughter of the local king - is next on the menu. At that stage, and only at that stage, St George happens to be in town. Protected by his Christian faith, he slays the dragon. The Libyans, duly impressed, decide to convert to Christianity.

The essence of the legend of St George and the dragon is the victory of good over evil, or, more importantly, the triumph of courage and determination over adversity; the triumph of bravery in the face of challenge.

Roger Bannister was spurred by the challenge of the four-minute mile. During the Blitz, of World War Two, the challenge of need enabled rescuers to lift heavy beams which, without challenge, they could not have managed. Without the challenge which led to the Civil War, Oliver Cromwell would probably have remained an unknown Norfolk country squire.

There may be a St George in each of us, but he may remain hidden - unborn - until we have to face a great challenge, until we have to face the dragon.

It has been said that among the few things respected by the British Army is a Victoria Cross - which has often been awarded to seemingly quiet and ordinary people who displayed a quite unexpected bravery when faced with great danger, when faced with an urgent need to deal with some dragon.

When a dragon appears, a St George is needed to slay it.

Every day, in places around the world, countless people - ordinary people, like you and me - face and cope with all sorts of situations of danger, adversity, difficulty. Each danger, each adversity, each difficulty, each challenge is a dragon. And each person who faces the challenge, who faces the danger, who triumphs over adversity, is a St George.

There is much greatness in human life - greatness, courage, determination, perseverance - which is out of our sight. It exists in countless multitudes of people - seemingly ordinary people, people like you and me - people whose names we have never heard.

It can also exist in us. We too can be St George, if we are challenged by danger, by difficulty, by adversity, and if we face the challenge with courage, perseverance, and determination.

Every dragon gives birth to a St George. Every challenging need calls out a divine spirit in the human soul.

So let it be with us.
Amen.