

St. George and the Dragon

All most people know about St. George is: “He killed a dragon”. Yet much is known about his life, although it needs to be separated from the dragon story.

George was born in the Middle East and became a tribune in the Roman Imperial Guard. In 298 Emperor Diocletian ordered the destruction of churches, banned the Scriptures and ordered Christians to take part in pagan worship.

Not willing to compromise and hoping to stop the persecution, George bravely used his position to gain an interview with the emperor. George’s appeal was rejected and he was beheaded on Good Friday, April 23rd, 304. Within a few years the emperor Constantine had become a Christian and he built a church on George’s place of execution and on his grave at Lydda in Palestine.

The image of a dragon was depicted on the Roman flag and coins. The dragon did not represent evil, but was merely fearsome and probably inspired by the sight of alligators in the river Nile. Constantine issued a coin with the Greek initials for Christ standing over a fallen dragon. This symbolised the Christian victory over the persecuting Roman Empire.

Many legends of varying quality grew about St. George. Then someone, at an unknown date and place, created a meaningful story featuring the saint. It was an allegory, not history. First published during the 13th century, and printed in England in 1483, it became popular as religious literature. When we omit a few words, obviously added by another hand, it reads:

“For some time a terrible dragon had ravaged all the country around the city of Selena in Libya, making its lair in a swamp. Its breath caused pestilence whenever it approached the town. So the people gave the dragon two sheep every day to satisfy its hunger, but when all the sheep were gone, a human victim was necessary. Lots were drawn and they fell upon the king’s daughter. She was led, dressed as a bride, to the edge of the swamp. There St. George chanced by and asked the maiden what she was doing alone in such a place. She told him of the dragon and urged him to leave, but he would not. When the monster appeared George made the Sign of the Cross and pieced it with his lance. He asked the maiden for her girdle and binding it around the dragon’s neck led it meek as a lamb, to the maid, who took it to the city. St George told the people to have no fear, but to be baptized, and bidding them to honour the clergy and pity the poor, rode on about God’s business”.

The city is a man, the king is his reason, which ought to rule over his passions, the princess his soul and the dragon the instincts and desires of the flesh. If the instincts are not governed by reason they threaten the soul. At first they may be placated with small things, but growing stronger by these concessions they eventually threaten the immortality of the soul itself. St. George on a white horse symbolizes the Grace of God, which if accepted enables the soul to master the flesh, the desires and faculties of which are then brought meek and controlled into their proper service of the whole man.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, artists and authors portrayed George as a patriotic hero killing England's enemies (represented by a dragon). These stories have caused both the real life of St. George and the religious allegory, to be forgotten.

Happy St. George's day!

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