

## Celebrating the Feast of St George

I love the fact that we get together to celebrate the life of someone we actually know almost nothing about. The chances are good that he was a martyr in the 2nd century, and for that alone he deserves our deepest respect, but of course he's become so much more through the amazing and delightful tales that grew up around him from multiple countries. Armies had victories under his banner; as we've just heard, a village was rescued from a dragon; he became patron saint of England, and is one of very few saints venerated by Muslims as well as Christians. How on earth did all this happen – and what do we, in our very rational and sceptical world, do with him?



I think we celebrate him, and here's why. Some of you might remember that occasionally a group of Christians somewhere will get a bit upset about books like the Narnia series because it's full of magic and witches and talking animals. Some of their concern is connected to the idea that magic is bad, but they also seem to be concerned that children won't be able to tell the difference between made-up stories and real-life stories. Perhaps that's the case for very, very young children, but mostly even young children know when something is taking them into the realm of imagination. They may think what they imagine is real, but not in the same way as their chair or bar of chocolate is real. There's a whole other layer wrapped around imaginative "realness": a layer of mystery and possibility and often beauty. Layers which are usually ruthlessly destroyed in us as we become old and sensible.

That's a pity. Because there are so many things which are best understood with our imaginations. We empathise with people because we can imagine what it is they are feeling or going through. We read books and watch films and in doing so are able to see the world imaginatively through eyes and minds and experiences which are not our own. Imagine if we never did that! Imagine if all we understood about the world was limited to our own tiny, carefully sheltered selves. And here's another thing: it is completely impossible for us, earth-bound, restricted creatures as we are, to understand anything

about God without imagination. Even when we're dealing with Jesus, who was a real person born in a real place at a real time with real friends, and when we're thinking about his resurrection which was really experienced and vouched for and died for by his real followers – even then, we have to use our imaginations, because resurrection isn't something we've ever seen or experienced. But when we do use our imaginations to try to grasp its reality, it begins to shape our lives.

GK Chesterton was once staunchly defending the presence of scary creatures like dragons in a children's story, and used our own St George to do so. He wrote:

*The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon. Exactly what the fairy tale does is this: it accustoms him for a series of clear pictures to the idea that these limitless terrors had a limit, that these shapeless enemies have enemies in the knights of God, that there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness, and stronger than strong fear.*

G. K. Chesterton<sup>1</sup>

I know that's a rather odd phrase: 'it accustoms him for a series of clear pictures to the idea that...'" but hopefully you get what he's saying. He's saying that we already have dragons aplenty in our lives, from the first unformed fears of childhood to the all-too-potent fears of adult reality. What tales like the one we've just heard is shape our minds to the belief that there is someone or something who can and will defeat those fears. It doesn't matter if St George won over a dragon in what we call "real life". What matters is the reality of the love of God which comes to us to transform those dragons inside us – and tales like the tale of St George get us used to the idea that it may be possible.

So let's celebrate St George. Let's celebrate all tales of courage and chivalry and redemption, because through these tales just sometimes we are able to glimpse the reality of the ultimate tale of courage and chivalry and redemption: of God, the King almighty, taking on the humble rags of human flesh and defeating the dragons of despair and meaningless and loneliness and death itself for us. The greatest story of all time, and this one is true.

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<sup>1</sup> G K Chesterton, "The Red Angel" in *Tremendous Trifles* (Overland Park: Digireads, 2011), 36. Originally printed 1909.