St. George: Martyr, AD 303
Patron Saint of England, soldiers, the mentally sick 23rd April

Shock Horror!
Recently the Press Association caused quite a lot of mirth in local and national newsrooms by trying to sell them this story.....

“England's Patron Saint never visited the country!”

This revelation went down like a lead balloon, ‘So who thought he did?’ was the slightly puzzled response. St George, poor soul, has always had a bad press. Gibbon, (he of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire), turned him into a pork butcher, who sold bad bacon at an exorbitant cost to the Roman Army, and this with no evidence at all, and when the Roman Church allocated his day, April 23rd to another saint altogether it was taken as a signal that either he had never existed or he was no longer to be venerated, a fate which actually overtook him quite recently. Luckily the Church of England calendar still allows him his proper place, (even if one year he had to give way to Easter Day, thus causing endless problems to pubs and scout troops). Like other saints, notably Nicholas and Christopher, George has proved remarkably difficult to dislodge, even resisting a parliamentary decree abolishing him in 1552. Why?

Perhaps it is because he is known for one simple fact. Like the more popular nursery rhyme characters he has entered the national culture on a ‘simple to remember basis’. Miss Muffet hated spiders, Mary lost her lamb, Jack and Jill are renowned for falling over. Similarly Nicholas is ‘Father Christmas’ and Christopher is for ever caught in time with the Baby on his back. Nothing to remember, easily retained facts have ensured their survival. And so it is with George, he killed the dragon.

Edward VI, (he was the king who ordered the 1552 decree), tried to take George's place himself. He had all coats of arms, all banners and all medals featuring George redesigned with his own portrait in the saint's place, (he was only fourteen, poor lad!), but luckily he died before the designs were ready and the project also perished. George lived on. Charles II and James II both chose April 22nd as their Coronation Day and marked the occasion with plays and pageants in which dragons featured prominently.

Nowadays we only see his flag when a drunken football supporter is wrapping his head in it to stop the cameras showing his mother or wife back home what he gets up to when away from their influence, which is sad. I am always pleased to see it flying from the Church Tower and I try to wear a red rose on the day. If all else fails I have an enamel brooch I can substitute. I think it would be great to see a more widespread acknowledgement of St George.

George’s name appears in a list of ‘those to be reverenced’ published by Pope Gelasius, in AD 495. However, St. Jerome listed him among the ‘saints and martyrs of Cappodocia’ as early as AD 350, which was less than fifty years after his supposed death date, so there is no doubt that he was a real person, with or without a dragon!

He was traditionally said to have been the son of a Roman Imperial Officer and to have become a Tribune in the Roman Army himself. When Diocletian published the Edict of Persecution against the Christians, George decided to plead their cause and accordingly he retired from the army, freed his slaves and went to see the emperor. It was on the way that history, or at least tradition, was made.

Passing through Beirut he saw, on the banks of the river, a beautiful maiden.... (of course, what self-respecting dragon would want an ugly maiden?)....dressed in bridal finery. As he approached she called out to him to pass by swiftly lest he should share her fate, but George, never the man to leave a damsel in distress, reined in and questioned her. He learnt that the town, of which her father was king, was terrorized by a fierce dragon. Originally the beast had been happy with a tribute of sheep but then it had seized a wandering shepherd, eaten him and developed a taste for human flesh. Thereafter it refused to be satisfied with the sheep and demanded a human diet. The king, finding his people reluctant to volunteer themselves or their children to be a dragon's dinner, issued an edict that every week a lot should be drawn and the person on whom the lot fell should be given to the dragon.

All went as the king commanded until the lot fell on his daughter. To the king's amazement the people were adamant that she should suffer the same fate as their children and no threats, pleas or bribes would change their minds. Their children had died for the common good, so should the daughter of the man who made the law. While the princess was telling George this story the dragon rushed upon them.

Seizing his sword, and calling on the name of Jesus Christ to help him, George wounded the dragon and, taking the girdle from the princess, he bound the beast and told her to lead it back to her home. As the people fled in terror, George called out to them not to be afraid. If they would be baptized in the name of Christ he would slay the dragon. Then the king and all his people were baptised and George slew the dragon and the people loaded it onto four ox-carts and dragged it away. George stayed long enough to see a Church built and dedicated to himself, then, refusing the offer of the princess' hand and great riches, he told the king to fear God, care for his people and give the money to the poor, and left to resume his journey.

Appearing in the Imperial court he failed in his appeal to save the Christians and was ordered to sacrifice to the emperor. Of course he refused and confessed himself a Christian. He was beheaded and his body was taken to Lydda where Constantine afterwards built a Church over it. It was during the crusades that he became popular in England and a vision of him on the walls of Jerusalem was said to have so heartened the soldiers that they took Jerusalem and held it against the Saracens. Edward 111 made him patron of his newly founded Order of the Garter and from this he became England's Patron Saint. His red cross on a white ground became the base for the Union Flag and is included in all service uniforms, a practice dating back to the Crusades.

(One small interesting point is that the river, near which the dragon was traditionally defeated, was known in the seventeenth century as 'The River of the Great Crocodile'. So maybe there was a real creature which preyed on the local people.)

St. George:
To George the Saint, You gave Your grace
Without one fear, all foes to face,
And to confess by faithful death
Your word of Life, which was his breath.
Oh, help us, Helper of Saint George,
To fear no bonds that man can forge.
Arm us, like him, who in Your trust,
Beat down the dragon to the dust.
Give us Your faith to be our shield,
To evil may we never yield,
So that we too may tread down sin,
And with Your saints, a crown may win.

L.Housman

Another St George.....

The glue between three religions.....?

George our Patron Saint, was listed among “the saints and martyrs of Cappadocia,” by St Jerome, as early as AD 350, this, however, according to Bishop Nazir-Ali, is a “perpetuation of an old myth....” our George never went near Cappadocia, he was or is George of Lydda, a completely different saint. George of Lydda (in Palestine) is known in the Eastern Church as the Great Martyr and is patron saint of Christians in Syria, India and several other Eastern Churches. “It seems appropriate,’ says Nazir-Ali, “that such an international figure should be patron saint of our multi-cultural country.” Well, maybe, but perhaps this sudden appearance of a George few of us were aware of is a little convenient in a climate of government opinion that seeks to eradicate George on the grounds that he is offensive to non-Christians among us.

And the dragon? Apparently in Orthodox tradition the dragon represents the pagan power ruling the area at the time, Rome. Legend tells of George of Lydda being an officer in the Roman Army forced to superintend the deaths of forty Christians. As they died he saw forty crowns coming down from Heaven and settling on the heads of the martyrs. So impressed was he that he straightway declared himself a Christian and suffered the same fate. In Icons he is shown with a young lady behind him, she represents the early Christian Church which he is protecting from the “dragon” of paganism.

George’s tomb is still in Lydda in a Church built by Helena, mother of Constantine, and it is revered by Christians, Jews and Moslems alike.

The people of Palestine, Christians, Jews and Moslems alike, revere the figure we call George as an amalgamation of three holy men, George, Al-Khader and Elijah, somehow, very early on the three figures merged in the myths and legends of the area. Al-Khader, “The Green One” was known to have a strong reverence for nature and was known to early Moslems as “Protector of Trees” and was seen as protecting the environment. He is obviously a good choice of Patron as we face global warming and environmental issues. I still somehow feel that transferring George of Cappadocia’s ‘kingdom’ to George of Lydda, thus giving us a multi-racial, multi-cultural, green Patron Saint is just a little too convenient, but maybe I am a cynic. Nazir-Ali was, after all, a Bishop. I suppose he should know better than me.

The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”

In Florida, an atheist became incensed over the preparation for Easter and Passover holidays and decided to contact the local ACLU about the discrimination inflicted on atheists by the constant celebrations afforded to Christians and Jews with all their holidays while the atheists had no holiday to celebrate.

The ACLU jumped on the opportunity once again to pick up the cause of the godless and assigned their sharpest attorneys to the case. The case was brought before a wise judge who after listening to the long, passionate presentation of the ACLU lawyers, promptly banged his gavel and declared, “Case dismissed!”

The lead ACLU lawyer immediately stood and objected to the ruling and said, “Your Honour, how can you possibly dismiss this case? Surely the Christians have Christmas, Easter, and many other observances. And the Jews--why in addition to Passover they have Yom Kippur and Hanukkah... and yet my client and all other atheists have no such holiday!”

The judge leaned forward in his chair and simply said, “Obviously your client is too confused to know about, or for that matter, even celebrate the atheists’ holiday!”
The ACLU lawyer pompously said, “We are aware of no such holiday for atheists, just when might that be, Your Honour?”
The judge said, “Well it comes every year on exactly the same date – April 1st!’

The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”

Psalm 14:1, Psalm 53:1