

Today the Church in East and West celebrates Saint George – a saint about whom much is told, but very little known. He is the patron saint, not only of England, but also of Portugal and Catalonia, and has been highly honoured in Russia and among Coptic Christians. There are accounts of his martyrdom which one learned commentator describes as “full beyond belief of extravagances and of quite incredible marvels”. The best-known story describes him as the slayer of a dragon, and the rescuer of a young woman, the dragon’s intended victim. But there is no historical foundation for any of these popular legends.

All we know for certain is that George was martyred at Lydda (now Lod in Israel) during the persecution of the emperor Diocletian, at the beginning of the fourth century.

So how did he come to be hailed as the patron saint of England?

The answer is, almost certainly, to be found in the history of the Crusades. It is recorded that warrior saints including George were seen miraculously assisting the Crusaders; Richard I (“Lion Heart”) placed his armies under George’s protection, and shortly afterwards his day was made a holiday in England. In 1348 King Edward III founded the Order of the Garter with George as its patron. New knights are still announced on his feast day. It was after the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 that George finally replaced SS Edmund and Edward the Confessor as national patron.

Among the readings suggested for his day is 2 Timothy 2: 3 – 13, which sets before us the example of the soldier, the athlete and the farmer, each of whom gains the reward of faithful service. I assume that the passage was chosen because the Greek word for ‘farmer’ is *georgos* – so we may think of the patron of England as one who *received the first fruits of the harvest*, because of his labour in the service of Christ.

We pray for our country and its leaders, for all persecuted Christians, and, particularly in this time of trouble and anxiety, that we too may *be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus*, trusting in the promise of the Gospel that *we may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory*.