

## ***St George of Lydda***

### **Patron Saint of England – and English Football<sup>1,2</sup>**

*“Then said St George: ‘Fair daughter, doubt ye no thing hereof for I shall help thee in the Name of Jesus Christ.’ She said: ‘For God’s sake, Good Knyghte, go your way, and abide not with me, for ye may not deliver me.’ Thus as they spake together the dragon appeared and came running to them, and St George was upon his horse, and drew out his sword and garnished him with the sign of the cross, and rode hardily against the dragon which came towards him, and smote him with his spear and hurt him sore and threw him to the ground...”*

*“And St George slew the dragon and smote off his head, and commanded that he should be thrown into the fields and they took four carts with oxen that drew him out of the city.”*

Described by Jacobus de Voragine, Bishop of Genoa in *The Golden Legend*, 1230 AD, the above episode is apparently the basis of the familiar account of St George and the Dragon. Princess Sabra is the young lady mentioned but she appears to be an embellishment and sadly contrary to romantic expectations, St George does not win her hand in marriage in the original narrative - he had more pressing business to hand.

A ruined tower, situated north of St George’s Bay where modern Beirut stands on the southern arm, traditionally marks the scene of the conflict. It took place in approximately 303 AD, when according to historian Pliny, the area was infested with crocodiles.

George may therefore have killed one while on his way to the Eastern Court of Emperor Diocletian, located at Nicomedia<sup>3</sup>, now Izmit, about sixty miles east of Istanbul.

The deed comes as no surprise when we consider George’s background.

### **Noble Beginnings**

George was born in 270 AD to Christian parents in Lydda, now Lod, located on the Plain of Sharon, Palestine. His father was Anastasius<sup>4</sup>, a distinguished Roman army officer who was appointed Governor of all Palestine at the age of twenty-five, with three thousand armed soldiers at his command. George grew up as a soldier-saint. A contemporary writer said of him<sup>5</sup>:

*“When St George had completed his twentieth year he was so exceedingly strong and valiant that he was the leader in battle and there was no one among all the company of soldiers who could be compared with him for strength and beauty. And the grace of God was with him, and He gave him beauty and strength that all those who saw him marvelled at his power and youth...and God was with him in all his ways.”*

George was at that time a general in the Roman Army, in command of five thousand men. None other than Emperor Diocletian himself had conferred this honour on the young man, so greatly impressed was he by George’s bravery and leadership.

### **Imperial Treachery**

But Diocletian was susceptible to less honourable influences. His subordinate and Emperor of the East, Galerius Maximus was a confirmed pagan and in 303 AD persuaded his superior to issue an Edict calling for the extermination of Christianity throughout the Empire. The persecution that followed was savage. Ten thousand Christians are said to have been massacred in Caerleon-on-Usk



alone, the organised centre of the British Church and thirty-eight thousand in the eastern half of the Empire. Possibly as many perished in the western half, including those in Britain<sup>6</sup>.

On learning of the Edict, George threw in his lot with the intended victims. He divested himself of his rank and worldly possessions\* and journeyed to Nicomedia to intercede with Diocletian on behalf of his suffering brethren, to plead for their lives and obtain for them freedom of worship. He sought for this purpose to utilise his friendship with Diocletian gained on the field of battle but for others only, not for himself.

\*Save for his personal arms, with which it appears he slew the crocodile.

Yet George knew that despite Diocletian's former regard for him, his mission could end in death. He said to friends before setting out for Nicomedia, *"If ye are alive and hear that I am dead, do me the kindness, for Christ's sake, to take my body to my native city and bury it."*

These wishes would be faithfully carried out.

### **A Bold Witness**

By the time George reached Nicomedia, its bishop, Anthimus had been executed and many believers had been terrified into silence by the sight of instruments of torture publicly displayed but when George saw a copy of the decree posted up for public inspection, while both emperors were in the city, he was *"stimulated by a divine zeal, and excited by an ardent faith...tore it to shreds as a most profane and wicked act."*

The contemporary historian Eusebius states that, *"St George was the first of those at that time who thus distinguished himself, and...in his endurance of such results as naturally followed a daring act of this kind, he maintained an untroubled and undisturbed demeanour to his very last breath."*

His ardour was unabated when he stood before Galerius and his sixty-nine governors.

He boldly declared, *"I am a Christian, and I believe on my Lord Jesus Christ; whatsoever ye desire to do unto me, that do"* and St Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, 374-97 AD, states, *"George, the most faithful soldier of Jesus Christ, when religion was by others concealed, alone adventured to confess the name of God, Whose heavenly grace infused such constancy into him that he not only scorned the tyrants, but contemned their torments."*

Galerius and his governors sentenced George to death and Diocletian, sadly, acquiesced in the verdict. After a period of imprisonment and torture in an effort to force him to recant, the martyr was beheaded on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 304 AD.

When he came to the spot where he would be executed, he asked leave of his guards to pray for his persecutors. Ever the soldier, he then turned to them said, *"Come with me, brethren, and fulfil your order and do what ye have to do."*

The date has of course gone down in history as St George's Day.

### **Association with England**

According to The Royal Society of St George<sup>7</sup>, *"It was in the year 1415 AD that St. George became the Patron Saint of England when English Soldiers under Henry V won the battle of Agincourt."*

The Society states that George was officially beatified by the Roman Catholic Church but the term 'Saint' George may well have been coincident with the widespread mourning that followed his death, which has been further commemorated by the propagation far and wide of St George's 'device' or knightly emblem, the familiar red cross on a white background. It probably signified George's regard for the blood sacrifice at Calvary of the Lord Jesus Christ and the sinless purity of the Saviour's life on earth.

England's adoption of St George's emblem as its national emblem may therefore indeed pre-date St George, and derive from the arrival of the earliest Christians to these shores during the first century AD, including Joseph of Arimathea. The striking and simple symbolism of the St George Cross could well have appealed to many early believers.

England's association with St George is much more direct, however. He visited York during his military service and was welcomed by the Christian Empress Helena, mother of George's comrade-in-arms, Constantine, who later became Emperor. St George's visit is commemorated by the shield emblazoned with his emblem that hangs over the gate of York – one of many instances where the soldier-martyr's ensign figures in English heraldry, pomp and circumstance – though none more widely celebrated than on present-day football terraces!

But there is a greater cause.

### **Not in Vain**

Like his Saviour, George achieved much in his death. By it, he slew a monster more dangerous than any saurian; the dragon of persecution. Diocletian abdicated in 305 AD and Imperial Rome's large-scale persecution of Christians ended.

It wasn't the end of persecution *per se* but in coming ages, God would raise up other men to stand, both against tyranny and for the witness of the Lord Jesus Christ, after the manner of St George<sup>8</sup>:

*"I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,  
"Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:  
"Follow your spirit; and, upon this charge  
"Cry God for Harry, England and St George!"*

From *Henry V*, Act 3, Scene 1

Or in the words of St Paul, 1 Corinthians 16:13:

***"Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong"***

### **An Exhortation**

God is still looking for men – and women - of stature who will stand and strive for the Lord Jesus Christ in these days of rapidly encroaching heathenism, as even God's enemy Pharaoh of Egypt recognized only too well, Exodus 10:11:

***"Go now ye that are men, and serve the LORD; for that ye did desire"***

Will you be among them?



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## References

<sup>1</sup> For graphic see [www.visitengland.com/blog/things-do/april-2016/seven-things-do-st-georges-day](http://www.visitengland.com/blog/things-do/april-2016/seven-things-do-st-georges-day) .

<sup>2</sup> *Saint George* by E.O. Gordon

<sup>3</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicomedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicomedia)

<sup>4</sup> George's grandfather, John, was the Roman Governor of Cappadocia, part of what is now Turkey. This accounts for the mistaken idea that St George was Turkish. St George, moreover, is not to be confused with the avaricious George of Cappadocia, Bishop of Alexandria, who was lynched by his own congregation in 362 AD.

<sup>5</sup> *George of Lydda* by I. Hill Elder

<sup>6</sup> Between 67 and 303 AD, Imperial Rome instigated ten distinct persecutions against the early Church, of which Diocletian's was the last. The total number of victims must number in the hundreds of thousands. "*Untold millions*" more would die, according to *Halley's Bible Handbook*, p 793, under "*the iron heel of the Papacy*" when Imperial Rome metamorphosised into the present-day Papal Rome. See *Which Bible?*, edited by Dr David Otis Fuller, p 214.

<sup>7</sup> [www.royalsocietyofstgeorge.com/historyofstgeorge.htm](http://www.royalsocietyofstgeorge.com/historyofstgeorge.htm). Note that this site locates George's birthplace as Turkey, which location is not borne out by other authorities. See above. However, the site agrees with these other authorities in other aspects of George's life and witness and overall is most informative.

<sup>8</sup> [www.britannia.com/history/stgeorge.html](http://www.britannia.com/history/stgeorge.html)