

Introduction

Compared with other countries in the world, England doesn't really make much of its patron saint! St. George's Day falls on the 23rd of April but it is rarely marked by any special events and it does not even earn us a Bank Holiday. Children's uniformed organisations however have adopted St. George's Day as a time to renew their commitment to their promises and laws and so there are parade services in many churches.

St. George's story has become focused in the popular imagination on his dragon-slaying exploit and as such he is seen as the archetypal hero who defeats evil. But there's more to him than just this legend. Although, as with many early saints, facts are very sketchy, it seems that he was from Palestine and, as a conscript in the Roman army, decided to stand up against the persecution of Christians in the fourth century because he was so disgusted by the barbaric methods employed by the Empire. He was very impressed by the faith of those who died believing in Jesus that he became a Christian himself, even though he knew that this would mean certain death.

At a place called Lod near Tel Aviv in Israel, St. George's Church is the alleged resting place for his body. In fact St. George is very highly regarded by many in this part of the world including Muslims. George is one the most popular boys' names. It seems that it was Richard the Lionheart from England who decided to adopt George as our English saint in the time of the crusades, probably because he too was impressed by the military might of this hero. Among Palestinian Christians however St. George has other associations: as a protector of the home, as a healer and as someone who stood up against the misuse of power.

It was at Lod - which in Bible times was called Lydda - that Peter was used to perform a miracle. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, he experienced the power of God of work through him to bring peace and healing to a man, who had been ill for eight years (see Acts 9: 32-35). As a follower of Jesus, this is the sort of power of which St. George would have approved and for which he would want to be remembered as a saint.

Preparation

The following idea picks up on this theme and links it to the cross of St. George (a red cross on a white background).

You will need: rectangular pieces of red card - one for every child; a set of four small white rectangles, again a set for every child. When these four smaller rectangles are placed on to the red card base at the corners you will form the red cross of St. George in the centre; some pencils and colours; some sticky fixits.

Development

1. Introduce the story of St. George and the dragon by showing a picture of him in action. You

will find these online. Many Greek Orthodox churches in the Middle East are dedicated to Saint George.

2. Talk about the legend. Explain however that this legend grew up some centuries after George lived and died, so I wonder what the legend is trying to say about him? I wonder what the dragon is meant to be? I wonder who the princess is meant to be? I wonder what this legend is trying to tell us today?
3. Christians are people who believe that the real power to overcome evil comes from the story of Jesus - his life, death and resurrection. St. George knew this too. He had seen how strong Christians had been when facing persecution from the Roman Empire.

George is believed to have lived for a while in a place called a Lydda (now call Lod) in Israel and it was here that Peter, one of the friends of Jesus, also saw the power of God of work.

Read the story from Acts 9: 32-35. It seems that everyone in the area got to hear about what happened to Aeneas. Why not try stepping into the story with your group by imagining what Aeneas' friends and family (and perhaps enemies?) said when all this happened. Use the technique called hot seating.

I wonder what happened to Aeneas afterwards? Do you think he became a strong follower of Jesus? Or did he just forget what God had done for him?

4. When George saw God's power at work, he decided not to forget but stay loyal to his new Lord, even though it meant death. This has impressed people ever since and the cross of St. George has become his sign as well as our English national flag
5. Give each child a set of four pieces of white card. The people of the Middle East remember St. George in four different ways:

As a protector of their homes to keep evil away. Many people have an icon of St. George in their houses. On the first piece of card invite the children to draw a picture of their home.

As a person who healed others with God's power. Many people make pilgrimages to St. George's Church in Lod to pray for those who are sick and the Cathedral in Jerusalem is named after St. George. On the second piece of white card invite the children to draw a picture of today's Bible story, when Peter healed Aeneas. I wonder for whom they would like to pray today?

As a person who looked after the environment. His name in Arabic means of 'the green one' and he is remembered as someone who cared about the trees and the earth. On the third piece of card invite the children the draw a countryside scene including all the things they like best about God's world.

Finally, as a person who is respected by people of many traditions and even other faiths. Christians, Jews and Muslims all respect St. George and in fact he is the patron saint of many countries including Portugal, Lithuania and of course Georgia! In addition his flag is not only used by the English but by a number of other towns and cities around the world. On the fourth piece of card invite the children to draw people of different nations and colours, all joined up together. Like his



Lord, St. George would have approved of being such a peacemaker.

6. These four aspects of St. George often get overlooked if we just focus on the dragon but of course the dragon itself is a symbol of all that is bad - the things that threaten what is in each of the pictures the children have drawn: danger to our homes, sickness, pollution and war.

St. George was a Roman soldier and as such would probably have worn a red tunic, especially as a cavalry officer. Now take the red card that represents the old life of St. George and, using some sticky fixits, attach the four white cards on to the red base. We now have a picture of the new life of Saint George as a Christian and at the heart of this is the cross of Jesus.

It's a visual example of what St. Paul wrote concerning those who become Christian: 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new person. The old has gone and, look, the new has come'
2 Corinthians 5:17

7. Why not pause for a moment now and use the four pictures as a focus for a short time of reflection.
Invite the children either to pick up the pictures or to say words that will be prayers for their homes, people who are sick, the world around them and for peace between countries. Finally, if you now turn over each of the pictures showing only the white side and reattach them to the red card, you have the cross of St. George and hidden within it the values of respect, protection, healing and care for the earth.

Here is certainly something of which St. George would approve and something worth celebrating on a national day.