

## Patronal Festival

We've had a busy day here at St Paul's. This morning we celebrated our patronal festival and said a formal goodbye to the Rev Pat. Therefore I'm sure you don't want a deeply profound sermon that'll make you think – your heads are already filled with too many thoughts and feelings! So I'm going to tell you a story abridged from a book by Edward Hays. It is a story about a young man called George. George wrote his story in a journal and so I'm going to read from his journal.

My story began several weeks ago when I began to feel an unexplainable urge to set out on a spiritual journey. I felt it deep within myself - a call to go on a holy quest. Now this call would have been explainable in the Middle Ages, but this is the twenty first century! My wife was outraged that she was expected to stay at home, care for the children and pay the bills while I trooped off to strange and distant lands! My boss thought that I was suffering from burnout and suggested therapy, while my neighbours only shook their heads in disbelief. Even the travel agent to whom I had gone was bewildered by my request. "I'm sorry," she said, "we don't have brochures or information on 'lands of quest.'"

But I heard the call. At the back of our garage I found my great-grandfather's rusty old army sword. Packing a few personal items, I bade farewell to my angry wife, confused children and chuckling neighbours and left. I walked all that day and into the night. As I walked the stars which had shone brightly, gradually disappeared, as the branches overhead grew denser and denser. Until it was pitch black. I began to wonder if I had lost my way.

Suddenly with an explosion of energy, sparkling light balls of scarlet fire, an enormous dragon stood before me. Its serpent like body was covered with scarlet scales that flashed orange and yellow. It was huge! I was terrified; I dropped my old rust sword and fell on my knees. Then I suddenly I realised that it was natural that I should find a dragon: after all I was on a quest. I just wished I wasn't so frightened!

"Hello stranger. You look like you're lost. Can I be of assistance?" asked the dragon with a tired voice.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Well, er.... yes I am lost. But I am on a quest, you see and from all I have read it seems that people who are on quests are frequently lost."

"That's correct," agreed the dragon. "Those who know where they're going in life usually aren't going anywhere, at least anywhere important. But you say you are on a quest? What are seeking?"

"I'm not sure - the Voice never said. Perhaps Truth, Freedom, the Holy Grail, the Fountain of Youth, Eternal life or .....,," and swallowing with difficulty, I added, "to Kill the Dragon."

At these words the dragon only yawned, sending great orange-red fireballs crackling through the cool, damp night air.

"Do you have a name?" asked the dragon, looking me straight in the eye.

"Well, yes, I'm called George," I replied.

"George is that all, just plain George?" asked the dragon. "Nothing in front of it, like SAINT George or Sir George? How can you expect to be treated with proper respect as one on a quest if you have no title? Who will believe you if you are just plain George?"

"Well, perhaps you're right, Dragon," I replied. "My neighbours think I'm mad, my boss thinks I'm suffering from burn-out and my wife, I'm sure, thinks I am having an affair. But all that's ever in front of my name are the two letters 'MR'."

"Sorry, George," replied the dragon. "They won't do; no romance in 'MR' – no colour either. We will have to give you a proper title if you wish to go on a quest."

With a dramatic flourish the dragon drew himself up to full height and announced in a deep, regal voice, "I, the Celestial Dragon, dub thee with the title of 'ST'. You may have it printed on your laundry tags for your socks and underwear and have it painted on your mail box - hence to be known by that title to everyone."

"With all due respect, Dragon, you can't do that. Only the Pope can make someone a saint."

"'ST.' my dear quester," said the dragon, "doesn't mean 'Saint'; it is the abbreviation for the four letter word 'Sent'. You, my friend, are George-who-is sent, or Sent George. You have to be sent before you can become a saint. And it seems that the Voice is calling you or sending you on your quest."

“Thank you, thank you so much,” I said. “That is most kind of you. I’ve always thought of dragons as evil, but I apologize for thinking that about you.”

“I am a Chinese dragon,” said the old dragon. “There’s a difference, you know! In China and the East, dragons are a good sign, one of blessing and good fortune. Historically, however, we do have a bad name. Heroes like Hercules, Siegfried, Beowulf, King Arthur and even your patron, St. George, were all dragon slayers. It’s because we have bodies similar to serpents that we are considered evil. Indeed, all who set out on a quest go looking for a dragon or some ugly, fierce monster to kill, but the real enemies are not outside forces in some dark forest — but rather, they are inside.”

Although the dragon made good sense, I was growing tired. It had been a long and difficult day, and I had to move on. The dragon smiled and said to me, “Everyone on a quest needs a good companion, a faithful and trusted guide. Let me be yours; I know this forest well. Come, climb up on my back,” said the dragon as he made a great deep bow with his scaly neck and head.

Now it didn’t seem logical, but I found myself liking this tired old dragon with his scarlet scales and great five-clawed feet. I felt like a prince as I rode on the back of the dragon. From this position high on his humped back, I noticed that the dragon’s body was covered with old wounds. Whenever the dragon breathed forth fire to light the path in front of us, I noticed that the wounds glowed golden-red in the dark. These old wounds aroused my curiosity, and when I asked about them, the dragon replied, “Oh, my friend, I have been slain a thousand times, but I have always arisen again. These old wounds are the source of my power and my insight. As I said, our greatest and worst enemies are not the monsters who roam the forest or even wicked witches or evil wizards. No, it is our scars, our wounds and old injuries that we must fear. As we journey through life we all have been injured - hurt by parents, brothers or sisters, schoolmates, strangers, lovers, teachers... the possible list of the guilty is long. Each wound has the power to talk to us, you know. They speak, however, with crooked voices because of the scars. But allow me to tell you a story that will make my point clear.”

“Once upon a time,” began the dragon, “a great samurai warrior with two great swords hanging from his belt approached a monk and said, ‘Tell me, holy monk, about heaven and hell’. The orange-robed monk looked up at the warrior from where he sat and replied in a quiet voice, ‘I cannot tell you about heaven and hell because you are much too stupid.’ The samurai warrior was filled with rage. He clenched his fists and gave a fierce shout as he reached for one of his swords. ‘Besides that you are very ugly,’ added the monk. The samurai’s eyes flamed and his heart was incensed as he drew his sword. ‘That’ said the little monk, ‘is hell.’ Struck by the power of the words and the wisdom of this teaching, the warrior dropped his sword, bowed his head and sank to his knees. ‘And that,’ said the monk, ‘is heaven.’ “

“You see,” continued the dragon, “the words of the monk touched old wounds, perhaps wounds that were made when the warrior was a child and was called stupid, dumb or ugly. It was his wounds that caused hell to capture him. All of us have wounds - old ones and new ones - and whenever the monster appears, when hell breaks loose, we know that our old wounds are talking, guiding us. It is these wounds that must be confronted and not us poor, innocent dragons.”

“But,” I said, “your wounds glow with great beauty, and you said they are the source of your power and magic. How can my wounds become a source of power?”

“First,” replied the dragon, “you must not give in to the voice of your scars, the voice of the times you trusted and were betrayed, loved and were rejected, did your best and were laughed at. Do not give weight to the scars left because you were slighted or were made to feel less than others. Instead, when those voices call to you to react with envious or jealous feelings, do exactly the opposite. When they say, ‘run away,’ you must stay. When they whisper, ‘distance yourself,’ then come all the closer. You must transform their power, not destroy it! That my friend, is really being involved in a quest. All quests begin with some question. Great quests begin naturally, with great questions. ‘Why am I not happy?’ ‘Why am I not a saint?’ ‘How do I find happiness?’ That’s what you’re questing for, George - happiness. And happiness, health, holiness and all the rest come only when we have made our injuries into glorious wounds.”

I felt a surge of excitement. Indeed, it was a great adventure to be on a quest.

The old Chinese dragon with the wounds that glowed so beautifully in the dark was indeed wise. I saw how my behaviour, which had so often hurt myself and others, had flowed from the fact that I had listened to the voice of some old wound. I realized what the dragon was saying to me. Yes, I must learn to listen to my pain as well as my pleasures. And I need to distinguish between the different voices I hear within myself, the voices of old wounds and the small quiet voice that comes from somewhere deep inside. It is this quiet voice that calls me to sacrifice, to generosity and to kindness, but it frequently has been out-shouted by the angry voices of my wounds. I have to begin a friendship with myself, with all of myself. Perhaps the goodness that I have been seeking on my quest is really all inside me.

And, suddenly, there we were, standing on the edge of the forest. Off to the east, the first light of dawn was on the horizon. I was amazed because we had stopped directly behind my own home. There was my back yard, my garage, the patio with the braai area. And warm, yellow light filled the kitchen windows. I felt my heart sink, and I asked, "Is my quest over? Must I return so soon to my family, my work and daily duties?"

"Yes and no," replied the old dragon. "You have heard the Voice; you have been sent upon a great adventure. This is only the beginning I promise you. If you wish, you and I together will visit strange and distant places; we shall unlock ancient secrets. But now, George, it's time for breakfast — I can smell the coffee brewing. Go home, George, and remember you are sent. You are sent to heal yourself, your family and the world with your wounds." And with that the great old dragon leaned over and, kissing me enveloped me in a cloud of flaming breath.

Although the journal of St George continues, I'm going to stop there because even from this short passage we can learn a lot. We are all on a quest of some sort. For many of you it is the quest for a happiness, for a sincere and deep spiritual relationship with God. That is why you are here come to worship God in Church late on a hot summer Sunday afternoon.

Yes, we are all like George, seeking something. And like George, many of us don't know what. Happiness? Eternal life? Peace and quiet? Health? Holiness? Each of us has our own deep desires. We, like George, have been sent. So, we too can call ourselves SENT. Sent Michael, Sent Lex, Sent Janet, Sent Karen, Sent Pat, Sent Derek.

All quests do begin with great questions and what most of us are questing for is Happiness, health and holiness. Jesus can supply us with all three of these. He brings them to us because he suffered for our sakes. By his death and resurrection he turned his injuries into glorious wounds. We too must turn the hurts of our lives into glorious wounds.

The dragon took George back home lent over him and kissed him, enveloping him in a cloud of flaming breath. God sends us, and kisses us, enveloping us in a cloud of flame, the flames of the Holy Spirit.

So journey on your quest today, into this new year, people of St Paul's. By seeking God, Father Son and Holy Spirit you will find happiness, health, holiness and wholeness .