This Sunday can feel an awful anti-climax. It’s called Low Sunday in contrast with the high festival of Easter last week, and perhaps too because church attendance tends to be a fraction of what it was on Easter Day. But fortunately for us Low Sunday this year falls on 23 April, England’s national day, the day on which William Shakespeare was born, and died; and, of course, the day of the festival of St George.

I

If you’re facing the north transept, as I am, you can see a huge and splendid stained glass window, depicting the patron saint of England - or so I thought until the expert Dean’s Verger put me right. The figure in the window is actually St Michael the Archangel, but he’s been given every appearance of St George. There he is, a young, chivalrous, heroic figure, clad in armour, sword and lance in hand, bearing a shield and banner emblazoned with a red cross on a white field. And lying vanquished at his feet lies a red dragon.

The legend of the dragon besieging a city, demanding as ransom the life of a maiden, is the stuff of fairy tales. You’ll remember how the king’s own daughter, the beautiful princess, offers herself to save the people she loves. But then into the city gallops St George, hears what’s amiss, and dashes off to fight the monster. After a long, fierce day’s battle, ‘The
dragon rushed upon him in fury and despair. St George thrust his bright sword into the open jaws with all the strength of his mighty arm. Clouds of the dragon’s smoky breath darkened the air; he plunged and roared; his scaly wings rose and flapped. At last, like a huge rocky cliff torn from the mainland in a tempest, the monster crashed and fell, and lay upon the earth, dead.’

So much for the legend. What, if anything, in St George, might be historical? We can’t be certain, but it is possible that he lived in the third century, the son of Greek Christians, and was brought up in Palestine. He may have followed his father into the Roman army, and been martyred during the Emperor Diocletian’s persecution of Christian soldiers in the year 303. George was buried back home in Palestine where his cult began.

What we can be certain of is that St George became important in England during the crusades. It’s said that soldiers saw a vision of him at the siege of Antioch during the first crusade. Richard the Lionheart put himself and his army under George’s protection, replacing Edward the Confessor as the patron saint of England. In 1348 Edward III founded the Order of the Knights of St George, better known as the Garter, the highest order of chivalry, with its chapel of St George in Windsor Castle, and his red cross as its banner.

II
Patronage, legend and festival are all typical of the great fuss the Church makes of saints. We bury them in holy places, with shrines and altars. We celebrate their day, and praise God for their witness. We put them in heavenly charge of churches, countries, causes, towns and trades. We depict them, crowned with halos, in paintings, icons, tapestries, statues and glass. We sing hymns and tell stories about their brave deeds and perfect lives. We preserve parts of their bodies, or the clothes they wore, and we venerate them as holy relics. We believe that saints can work miracles, bringing healing and blessings to those who go on pilgrimage to their shrine.

Much of all this is true of our own St Frideswide, patron saint of our city and university of Oxford. Like so many saints, we know much about the fuss, but very little about the history. Indeed, the Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History here in the 1930s, the eccentric Claude Jenkins, preached surely the shortest sermon ever given in this cathedral. It consisted of just eleven words: ‘Of St Frideswide’, he preached, ‘absolutely nothing is known; she was doubtless good.’

We can probably be confident enough that Frideswide was the daughter of a seventh century Anglo-Saxon king, who established a priory on or close to the site of this cathedral. Here she was the abbess, and here she was buried, creating a focus for the veneration of a saint.

The beautiful Burne-Jones window in the Latin Chapel, close probably to where the saint’s shrine once stood, depicts in delightful detail the colourful episodes that came to adorn her story. St Frideswide is pursued
by a prince who wants to marry her. She is bound to celibacy, and rejects him, but he won’t take no for an answer, and comes to abduct her. She flees to Abingdon, pursued by the prince, and hides in a pigsty. Next she escapes to Binsey, and then returns to Oxford, to which the prince laid siege. Frideswide prays for deliverance, and the prince is blinded by a bolt of lightning. The window concludes with the saint’s death, and at the top we can see her journey to heaven in a ship.

III

I want to ask why the Church makes such a fantastic fuss of saints? Why are the doubtless virtuous and faithful lives of some Christians so magnified by legends and miraculous powers, and given such extraordinary status among the followers of Christ?

I suggest that a part of the answer lies in the difficult transition in ancient Greek and Roman society from polytheism to monotheism. The first Gentile Christian converts lived in a world of many gods and goddesses, and though they may have embraced a new religion which worshipped one creator God incarnate in Jesus Christ, old beliefs and habits lingered on. The vacuum left by the rejection of Zeus and Apollo, Kronos and Mars, was filled with a new pantheon of Christian saints and martyrs. The old gods were patrons, Minerva of wisdom, for example; Venus and Eros of love. The old gods had their legends and festivals; their shrines, and magical powers. Now saints came to fill that gap, and establish a new tradition of holy men and women who were venerated and revered in much the same way as the pagan deities of old.
That was fine - up to a point. The trouble was that pagan gods and goddesses were, of course, divine. They may have shared human virtues and frailties, but nonetheless, they were immortal gods, they possessed supernatural powers, they inhabited the heavens. And so, likewise, the Christian saints and martyrs came to be seen too as god-like. Minor gods or demi-gods perhaps, but gods nonetheless.

Hence the practice in the Roman Catholic Church of praying to the saints to ask them to intercede with God on our behalf, making our prayers, all the more powerful. So saints are seen to be mediators, go-betweens us and God. It’s this belief that troubled the Reformers of the sixteenth-century. For Protestants, the Bible speaks of one and one only mediator between God the Father, and that is God the Son. We pray only through Jesus Christ our Lord. Article 22 of the Church of England’s 39 Articles of Religion declares: ‘The Romish Doctrine concerning . . . Invocation of Saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God.’

I would guess that for most Anglicans, saints are models, examples, ideals, of what it means to live in the Spirit of Christ, to be Christ-like, to be perfect imitations of our Lord. Saints are inspirations, examples to follow and models to emulate. They give us confidence that, with God’s grace, a Christ-like life is possible. It’s happened, after all, many times before.
Looking back for encouragement to the heroes of our history is a strong English characteristic. We remember and revere our Kings and Queens; our many great writers and musicians; and our warriors, Nelson, Wellington, Churchill, and Henry V. Think of Laurence Olivier’s 1944 film of Shakespeare’s play. It was commissioned to boost morale at the end of the war. ‘Cry God for Harry, England, and St George!’

Many years ago I was the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Chaplain. Lambeth Palace has a marvellous collection of archbishops’ portraits, and though I’m afraid very few archbishops deserve to be called saints, I found their pictures, and their lives a powerful inspiration. Many had faced considerable trials and tribulations that put our own in proportion. The courage, faith and wisdom they had shown in the past often proved a welcome encouragement for the present.

On one occasion I was asked to take a visiting Orthodox patriarch and his entourage on a tour of the Palace. I proudly showed them these portraits, but the patriarch was clearly not impressed. ‘You have no religious pictures here,’ he exclaimed. What he was expecting were icons, or paintings of Biblical scenes, or of saints and martyrs. He was right, of course, but what he missed was that these portraits were in their own way religious pictures. For an Anglican, they had much the same power that a picture of a saint might have. For us these are inspiring, encouraging examples of people who had shared the same faith, and laboured with patience and determination to make it relevant to the England of their time.
But finally, and most important for us, is what Scripture has to say about saints. And here we see a very different picture. The Greek word, ‘hagios’, appears over 200 times in the New Testament, and it’s clear that a saint does not refer to a dead person who is recognised as especially holy, but rather to the living faithful; to those who make up the body of Christ; to those who are dedicating their lives to God. In other words, all of us who believe in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and trust in Christ’s salvation, and try our best to lead virtuous and prayerful Christian lives, we are all of us deserving of the name ‘saint’. That’s what St Paul meant when, for instance, he addressed the Christians in Corinth: ‘To the Church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, grace to you and peace from God.’

Knowing that we are all called saints, and called to be saints, is both an inspiration and a responsibility. We have no excuse not to aspire to be good and holy and faithful, like those saints we revere. There aren’t two classes of Christian: the really good ones, the heroes, the ones we celebrate – and the rest of us. We’re all of us saints, and that’s a very great compliment, and a very great blessing. But it also means we have much to live up to, if we’re to be worthy of the name.

And so we pray: Almighty God, through Christ we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice. Send us out in the power of the Spirit, to live and work to your praise and glory. Amen.