

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



## HERE BE DRAGONS

11 February 2024

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon

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This weekend a quarter of the world are celebrating Lunar New Year. In the Chinese calendar it's the Year of the Dragon. In Chinese mythology dragons are many and significant. Dragons are associated with hills and mountains. Kowloon in Hong Kong means nine dragons. Kowloon has eight peaks, eight hills. The ninth dragon was the Chinese Emperor. In Ancient China, the Emperor used to be revered like a dragon and dragon imagery was restricted to the imperial family.

This is not ancient fantasy. It affects the way some buildings are constructed. In China there are tall buildings constructed with great holes in the middle to allow the dragon to come and go from the hill behind. So Chinese Christians enjoy a rich dragon heritage that has deep connections with our faith. "And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world".<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, a heavenly hero killing a dragon is common across cultures.

Faith and dragons are closely linked for us too. Whilst we wait for Edmund to be reinstated as Patron Saint, we put up with the chap who supposedly slew the dragon. There are dragons in our churches and Cathedrals, as gargoyles and carvings. King Arthur is Arthur Pen-dragon. In The Hobbit, since Tolkien knew of these things, Smaug sleeps on his great hoard of gold, in a mountain.

You may know the legend of Martha and the dragon in Provence. Martha, the sister of Lazarus and Mary, friends of Jesus. After Christ's Ascension, they were set adrift in a boat, which was guided by an angel to Marseilles. In Marseilles, according to legend, Martha overcame a dragon, the Tarasque, which had been terrorizing the people of Tarascon in Provence. The monster killed passersby and sank ships. So the people appealed to Martha for help. Armed with an aspergillum (which you use to sprinkle holy water), she went after the dragon. In one 15th Century picture, we see the beast subdued by Martha with a rope round its neck. A man plunges a spear into its neck while another, at a safer distance, aims his crossbow. There are different versions of the legend and the beast takes different forms. A dinosaur has been named Tarascosaurus. And a great festival takes place in June.

Dragons take many forms. They are fearsome beasts. They are mysterious creatures, lurking in our conscious and subconscious awareness. So they are a rich metaphor for our spiritual lives. We like to think we know what's going on for us psychologically, emotionally and spiritually. Most of the time I don't have a clue! Our lives are influenced by fears and imaginings, wounds and vulnerabilities. Our dreams by night and our fantasies by day reveal this.

Lent begins on Wednesday. Traditionally in Lent we try to slay the dragons of attachments and addictions that limit our lives. In Lent we are invited to seek, to approach, even to embrace our

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 12.7-8

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dragons. The dragon of past trauma. The dragon of childhood pain. The dragon of grief. The dragon of anxiety. The dragon of blame. The dragon of mortality.

A prayer of Janey Morley states beautifully:

O God, you are able to accept in us what we cannot even acknowledge.

You are able to name in us what we cannot bear to speak of.

You are able to hold in your memory, what we have tried to forget.

You are able to hold out to us the glory that we cannot conceive of.

Reconcile us through your cross to all that we have rejected in our selves,  
that we may find no part of your creation to be alien or strange to us,  
and that we ourselves may be made whole.

This is the way of transfiguration. This morning's Gospel is the strange, mystical transfiguring of Jesus on the mountain top.<sup>2</sup> The Transfiguration prefigures the Resurrection. Here we are just before Lent and we have a vision of what is to come at the end of Lent in the Cross and Resurrection. Jesus shows us the goal, the glory, the presence of God that is the fulfilment of our lives.

We have a choice. Do we keep our dragons locked away under trap doors or in dungeons? Living with a sense of embarrassment, guilt, inadequacy - smoke belching out from time to time, strange roaring in the background – our hidden fears compounding the discord, the pain and the sin of the world? Or do we seek to tame our dragons, with grace and divine tenderness? We can be open to God working within us, in the dark, hidden places. We might learn to live with our dragons – accepting they are part of us – bringing them out into the open, into the light. Yes, it is scary this journey into the unknown. Yes we need to be brave. But it is the way to life. For “Our deepest fears are like dragons guarding our greatest treasures”.<sup>3</sup> And God longs for us to be transfigured.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 9.2-9

<sup>3</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke