

Despite the fact that it is where we live 99 per cent at least of our lives, we seem to have a great aversion to the everyday. We need look no further for evidence of this than our most popular cultural creations, soap operas. Supposed to reflect the everyday lives of everyday town or country folk, one episode of East Enders, Coronation Street, Neighbours or even the Archers, contains more extraordinary goings-on than most of us manage to fit into an entire life. In real life, it's unheard of for a wedding to be interrupted by an ex running in screaming 'he still loves me', yet every time someone decides to get hitched in Eastenders, you know that's where it's going. Occasionally there is a variant 'you can't marry him, he's your sister' which is also unheard of in real life, outside of Norfolk. Whether it's Albert Square or Ambridge, the everyday is, well, just too everyday. Of course it's not just the soaps. If a tale we are telling is incomplete, we fill in the gaps, and we very definitely don't fill them with humdrum details. We stuff in all the sorts of exciting things that, with very little prompting, tumble out of our imaginations.

Nowhere is our aversion to the ordinary and our love for the fantastical more obvious than in our attitudes to the saints. Many of the saints we venerate, although they undoubtedly were real people had lives that bore no relation to the tales we tell about them.

If the woman called Margaret killed for her Christian faith in 3rd century Antioch were to walk into any of the many churches dedicated to her she would no doubt be curious as to who the young lady in the statues, paintings and banners, stomping on the dragon was. She'd be very surprised indeed to find out it was herself. Her fellow third century martyr, Christopher might be fascinated by the medallions travellers sport for their protection and pleased at their obvious Christian origins, but bemused to find that the giant bearing the Christ Child pictured on them was himself. And let's not even mention St Nicholas.

Where saints are concerned, it seems that we can't resist embellishing the facts. And sometimes we just plain make it all up, saint included. You may or may not have heard of the popular mediaeval English saint Rumwald. The relics of Saint Rumwald were claimed by at least different three places in mediaeval England, not bad for someone who almost certainly never existed. Rumwald was, so his legend tells us, a prodigious infant who lived only three days after his birth, but nevertheless managed in that time to declare his christianity, ask for communion and perform that most difficult of tricks, preach a sermon on the Trinity. Mozart, eat his shorts! Now however silly this legend may seem to us now, to the Mediaeval mind this was a story just too

good *not* to believe. And to be honest, it's no more fantastical than what you find printed on every page of the Daily Mail.

There is something very central about the way humans imagine their luminaries that prefers the fabulous and the flashy to the humdrum and homely. We like our heroes and our saints sensational and swashbuckling, go-getting, and glamorous.

Look at the patron Saint of England. Up until the fifteenth century our national patron was not the testosterone-soaked lionhearted George, but a toss up between Edmund, martyr king of the East Angles and Edward the Confessor, 11th century King of England and founder of Westminster Abbey. There were two contenders, but it wasn't exactly a battle of the Titans.

St Edmund's principle claim to fame was that he was captured by Viking raiders, and when he refused to renounce his Christianity was put to death: either by being spreadeagled or shot full of arrows depending how gruesome you like your tales. When Edmund's followers came to recover his body (presumably when the Danes had got bored playing with it and gone off to harass someone else) they found it was headless. Happily a wolf had found the head and a few days later he reunited it with the body whence Edmund miraculously became whole again. Still dead, but whole. Really. The Vikings and the wolf are the show stealers there: Edmund is not exactly the star turn in the 'how to be a good king' pageant.

St Edward's tale is an even less exciting one: there are no battles with dragons, no gruesomely picturesque martyrdoms, no Vikings or wolves. Edward was a failure. By the standards of his day he was a huge failure. He spent half his life on the run, was bullied by his in-laws; he left this life childless, his kingdom with no successor and ripe for the national disaster of the Norman conquest. If he were to appear on the Jeremy Kyle Show today no doubt the audience would be holding up their hands and shouting Loser! But this, is the very quintessence of sainthood- failure.

On this Feast of All Saints we celebrate the great failures of the world. Those who failed to grab all they could. Those who failed to make a success of themselves by pushing everyone else aside. Those who failed to climb the greasy pole, failed to claw their way to the top. Those who failed to ensure their wealth or their dynasty or even their personal comfort.

And in this they were only following their Lord, their God and their saviour. Because Christ on the cross is the ultimate failure. The world two thousand years ago looked

at Jesus on the cross and saw absolute, total, humiliating failure. They looked at Jesus on the cross and jeered: Loser. Only Christian eyes, only Easter eyes can see that the scene is in fact one of supreme victory.

The truth is, that if we could discover what the real life of St George was like, it was probably even less interesting and less exciting than St Edward's- Edward was king after all. But then George is not a saint because he killed a dragon. They are saints because they loved God. The love of God, the love for God; *that* is what transforms dust and ashes into the saints in light. Not dragon-killing.

So today, we sing the praises of life's losers, those who lost their lives for Jesus' sake. The saints. Glorious failures. Thanks be to God.