



A sermon for the Wells Cathedral School Leavers' Service at Wells Cathedral, preached on Friday 3 July by the Very Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells.

Kindness and dragon dreaming

Ron Weasley famously says in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* 'What's life without a few dragons?'

There may be some of you who are doing a double take, but no you're not seeing things. We are joined by a host of mythical creatures in the Cathedral at this time, as part of a special exhibition.

Mythical creatures are found throughout literature – from the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* to Tolkein's *Smaug and Orcs*, to Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*. And we are no strangers to mythical creatures here in Somerset – from the Giant Worm of Shervage Wood, nestled in the Quantock Hills, to the Dunster Dragon.

And older still are the biblical accounts of mythical stories. We can look to Leviathan in Job 41 and Psalm 104; to Behemoth in Job 40 with '*bones like tubes of bronze*'; to the Seraphim of Isaiah 6, to Lilith in Isaiah 34 and the dragons and pit locust horse-like creatures of Revelation.

Here in the Cathedral, we also have our share of mythical beasts – from the carved stone statues to the wooden misericords and the exceptional collection in our world-famous books in the library. We are surrounded by the stories of mythical beasts and creatures all the time; we just rarely notice them.

Now mythical beasts and dragons can be both wild and dangerous, but they can also be empowering and protective.

The physicists among you will know of the square cube law where scaling up a creature's size multiplies its weight much faster than its wing surface, making flight highly complex. Like those of you who accept the unproven 'dark energy' and 'dark matter', so Christians accept the creative hand of God over all that is created, 'seen and unseen'.

The historians among you will be inspired by the 14th Century wooden misericord of the mythical griffin in the quire here, a figure of considerable

importance in studying ancient trade routes between east and west, for the economists among you.

Psalms 148 says, 'Praise the Lord from the earth, you dragons and all deeps'. For this is a building where every crisis became an opportunity for beauty, and where eight centuries of history remain written in stone.

It was the psychologist Carl Jung who wrote in a letter to one of his patients in 1916, 'your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart... Who looks outside dreams; who looks inside awakes.'

I really encourage you to look into your own hearts as you finish this academic year. Trust that process of awakening that can come when you make space in your lives for that interior journey. And tread carefully as you do so.

In life, we often see people living inside the bars of an invisible cage of their lives. There was a famous study published in the journal *Animals* of chimpanzees in Johannesburg Zoo from 2002, where they lived in a 100m square cage. They moved then to one 25 times the size. Five years later, 98% still lived in an area the size of the original cage.

Invisible cages: If we turn to the experiments of the psychologist Martin Seligman, we see subjects repeatedly experience limits and stop trying – even when freedom becomes possible. Be careful of the inner traitors that tie us to our old invisible cages.

So what of this for those who are finishing a year at Wells Cathedral School or are leavers, or maybe are parents or staff? My suggestion is one way to see the dragons around us is as reminders of looking beyond limits. These beasts are drawn from one of the Cathedral libraries most ancient and mysterious texts, *Historia Naturalis*. They remind us of breaking out beyond our current limits and growing out into the world beyond. The people who created them, reached out beyond the confines of experience to the wonder of possibility. I invite you to do the same.

As you do so, my one bit of advice - as the great spiritual writer Francis de Sales wrote in *Introduction to the Devout Life* - is that we pursue simple acts of kindness. As you depart from this place, leavers, I encourage you to look into your own heart. There'll be some dragons you'll encounter in life. Some will be destructive, others will be life-expanding adventures. Whatever you do, pursue simple acts of kindness as you move beyond this place into the places you will go.

Those who founded this school in 909, were captivated by the Christian vision, seeking holistic human flourishing. The Christian vision is rooted in the belief that all people are made in the image of God – and that the whole person matters. The Christian vision which continues to shape good for so many across our world builds dignity and respect, fosters healthy relationships, and builds hope and aspiration. This vision holds kindness close to its heart in this place.

For kindness is what will lead our world to be a better place. Reflect on those who have been kind to you in your time. And as the school motto encourages you—*Esto quod es*.

Be what you are.

Ron Weasley's saying, '*What's life without a few dragons?*' recalls us to the adventures that lie ahead of you all and to the empowering and protective reality of kindness.

In psychology, dragons can be the hero's adversary or a divine protector, a kindness. You may have heard the phrase that resistance is the dragon that guards the gold. Our places of resistance can be real gems of protection.

Dragons can be undifferentiated forces that can crush ego development if not confronted and tamed. They can represent what terrifies, but also what protects. Often dragons in dreams announce change and signify transformation. In some myths, many dragons are not to be slain, but befriended and embraced as we open to the inner world or protect sacred space.

Amazing leavers from this amazing school - Go forward with kindness, slay the fearful dragons, and journey with the joyful life-giving ones. Remember that by facing our inner dragons we gain strength: don't be confined to the old cages. So go on adventures round the world in all sorts of ways and as you do so, always pursue simple acts of kindness. And always, always remember to be what you are, allowing the dragons in our lives to be the teachers we need:

'Praise the Lord from the earth, you dragons and all deeps'.

Amen.

Amen.

The Very Reverend Toby Wright
Dean of Wells

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