

Sermon Archive 549

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Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflection on swashbuckling and love

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An Introduction: Influencers and Mentors

Anyone can be an influencer. All you need to do to be one is exert an influence within a culture. You can exert it for good, or for bad. Often you do it for your own gain - for money or ego. But then, over and against the influencer, is the **mentor**: a person who influences, but out of a concern for the growth of someone else. Mentors are people who care for others. They need to be people who can recognise strength and weakness, and can work creatively with both. These are key skills **internal** to the mentor. Given, though, that mentors need, in a way, to be chosen (the mentored needs to want to follow the mentor, to "let them in"), they also tend to be people who demonstrate in their own lives the qualities desired by the aspirant. In this way, mentors need to be inspirational.

Do we need inspiration? Well, maybe not, if we're happy not to be all that we can be. But if we want to polish the gift of life, to fulfil our potential, then it does us no harm to see inspiring deeds. It does no harm to see the human being attractively "fully alive". Is that why we compile lists of inspiring heroes and heroines?

A reading from the Book of Hebrews.

Lesson: Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2

Reflection: Heroes and heroines

They conquered kingdoms and administered justice. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire. They shook strength out of weakness, put evil armies to flight. A definition of swashbuckling: "engaging in daring and romantic adventures with bravado or flamboyance".

On the list for inspiration is Rahab, from the Book of Judges. Not escaping the judgment of the world, she's described as "Rahab the prostitute", conducting her oldest profession from a couple of rooms inside the fabric of the wide walls of the city of Jericho. Both appreciated by her city for her work, and also despised

for her work, she finds herself protecting a couple of Hebrew spies, who've been sussing out weaknesses in her city's defence. Convinced that **their** Hebrew God, rather than **her** Canaanite gods, is true, she hides the spies for a while, shows them a safe way out of the city, then throws their pursuers off the track. It's all high-risk stuff - spies and secrets, cloak and dagger, intrigue and escape. It finds for her (and her family) a place of honour in the story-telling of the people of the Hebrew God. In terms of the context of the immediate campaign between Canaan and Israel, she chose the right side to work for. I guess, to the people of Jericho, she was a traitor. In the long term, was she on the wrong or the right side of history? Maybe it depends on who's reading the history.

Also on the list is David - a harpist and writer of poetry. A precocious boy with a slingshot. A person who managed to survive while a troubled and violent king acted towards him in jealousy and anger. An impressively skilful strategist. And mighty in battle - the one who secured a sense of peace and security amid the madness of fighting nations. Also an adulterer, who on the cusp of being "found out", shut things up by killing his victim's husband. How will history remember him? Will it celebrate his achievements or mourn his crimes? That might depend on whether the history reader also likes reciting poetry.

Also on the list is Samson - super-handsome. And so strong - there are stories of him tearing a lion to pieces with his bare hands, of him destroying a whole army with a donkey's jawbone. The remarkable strength, sourced it is said in his uncut hair, a sign of his dedication to God. His last deed is, when captured, to use his strength to pull down the temple in which he's captive. Shame about the people with him in the temple. To the Philistines, and to many other perhaps more impartial observers, his last deed sounds like the work of a suicide bomber. Judged by history, how does Samson go?

What does a responsible reading of list in Hebrews require of us, who might want to be inspired? Even perhaps to imitate? Two things -

Firstly - We need to be very careful in our analysis of our heroes and heroines. Heroes and heroines are human beings - and human beings are "human". A common piece of advice is: "never meet your heroes". Many report how their illusions were shattered by meeting famous people. Maybe the famous one was having a bad day, let themselves down. Or maybe no celebrity is ever able to equal the PR hype they've created. Maybe it's not fair for us to generate images of others from distance and our propensity to generate fantasy. So, no; don't meet your heroes - keep instead the caricature - "the

daring, romantic, adventuresome caricature". What do you reckon? While this might keep the magic alive, it's also holding onto what is not real. It's burying our heads in the sand. I'm not sure that **this** is the way to go . . .

So, secondly, how about this instead? We join the writer of Hebrews in acknowledging: "Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised". What was promised? Something to humanise, to complete, to make real? We come back to this later. But for now, if we acknowledge that our heroes and heroines are not super-human - but ordinary, fallible people, we then can marvel at what they managed to do. They did write poems. They did work out where the truth lay. They were brave. They did take risks for what they thought was right.

One last word from the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews: it goes like this: "time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, of Samuel and the prophets". The point's made that there are many people in the cloud of heroes and heroines. Perhaps we need to hear this, and be comforted by this, when maybe we've fallen into believing that no one has courage or character - when our world stage seems to be full of anti-heroes doing anti-heroic things. Lest we sink into cynicism and disappointment about humanity, the writer of Hebrews says there are **so many** good people doing **so many** heroic things, that time is not enough to describe it. Surrounded, we are, not by one or two, but by a "great cloud" of witnesses, heroism is more common than we think.

Seeking then the perfection of human endeavour, we press on towards the best that we can be - looking to the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith.

Music for Reflection:

Lesson: John 13: 31-35

Reflection: Was Jesus a Swashbuckler?

The Apostle Paul was probably the first to speak of the "imitation of Christ". It's a theme taken up by many since. Indeed, the writer of Hebrews talked about "looking to Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of the Faith". The idea is to follow him, to become like him, to allow his life to shape and form our life. Well, is it the life of a swashbuckler? Daring? Adventurous? Courageous? A flamboyant expression of the romantic?

Well, if you grab a Children's Illustrated Bible, you'll find Warner Salmons drawings of the Pioneer (a white Protestant male with bright blue eyes)

treading the waves of the storm. You'll see him fending off devils in the desert. You'll see him exorcising demons into the pigs, then off the cliff. You'll see him swinging his whip of cords, sending money-changers flying. You'll see him carrying the great heavy weight of the cross (like some latter-day Samson), falling but always getting up again. It'll be difficult to tell the difference between the children's Bible and a boys' own adventure annual. But of course, that will all be to look to him in too shallow a way.

What about we look beneath the swashbuckling deeds to the strength of character that makes those deeds possible? Do we, from our time of disappointing leaders, see in Jesus a figure of inner strength? Do we, from our time of shallow manifestos, see in Jesus a depth of purpose? Do we, from our time of corruption and self-absorption, see in Jesus a truth of conduct and a sacrifice of spirit? Are **these** the things that we, seeking to take on the character of the heroic Christ, are called to cultivate?

In a quiet moment, Jesus warns his disciples that he will be with them only for a little while longer. Then they, and all the world will look for him, but won't find him. Everyone, though will see him in those who have fulfilled "what was promised", but what the old heroes and heroines didn't manifest. He says to them "Beloved, I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. If you love one another, then everyone will see that you are my disciples." What was promised? What was missing before? What, in Christ, was fulfilled? He speaks to them of learning to love. Humanity becomes fully alive, the promise is fulfilled, the hero, the heroine comes actually and really to be, when we discover . . .

- Adventure is door-opening, but the key to the door is love.
- Strength of character is inspiring, but humanity completing nurturing comes from love.
- Flamboyant romance is thrilling, but profound is love.
- Swashbuckling is exciting, but that which changes the world and fulfils humanity is love.

A moment of quiet.

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