

'Jesus – the true hero'

Cathedral Eucharist, Sunday 13th August, 2017

9th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 14), Yr A

Sermon by the Rev'd Dr Mike Kirby, Priest-Vicar (SSM), Chester Cathedral

Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Amen

Who are your heroes? Who are your heroes?

In our modern, technologically advanced, internet driven world, we are surrounded by many examples of heroes – both real and fictional. The Oxford dictionaries define a hero as *one who is admired for their courage, their outstanding achievements and noble qualities*. So ones which spring to mind might be our sporting heroes – with our Athletics, Football and Cricket all featuring over these summer months, one could regard the outstanding achievements of Mo Farah and Usain Bolt as likely candidates. Still in the sporting world, we might look to our Paralympians – described as superheroes, because of their wonderful achievements in the face of what some may describe as their distinct disadvantages. We might have heroes of the stage and screen, or in the worlds of science and medicine. For me for the latter are great scientists like Crick and Watson, or Marie Curie – for whom her outstanding achievements regarding radiation and radioactivity brought about her death too, from the effects of that radiation.

In the world of science fiction we see the term superheroes again, in the likes of Superman or the X-men – individuals derived from a world of genetic mutation, taking them from the ordinary to the

extraordinary. And perhaps in a more real down to earth sense, we see examples where people show the highest noble qualities of all – on the battlefield, or even in everyday life when people risk their own lives for the sake of others – going beyond the call of duty to sometimes give themselves to save others.

There is no doubt that Jesus could be viewed merely as just another human hero – or for some people a fictional one. But for us as Christians, we know that Jesus, the Messiah is the truth – the way and the life; even if some of his works were definitely stranger than fiction, he brought about miracles which, for me, we still haven't found an understanding for. Our passage this morning from Matthew's gospel illustrates this extremely well – where Christological implications (Jesus' nature being both equally human and divine) are richly illustrated, and his teaching by example is strongly demonstrated.

We are once again on the shores of Lake Galilee; Jesus has just been teaching the crowds, thousands of them and illustrated already his miraculous power with the feeding of the five thousand. But instead of keeping the disciples with him, he sends them on ahead onto the Lake in a boat by themselves. One always gets the feeling that Jesus' actions are always meaningful, never trite or just on a whim – perhaps once again he knows what is coming. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to go to the Holy Land may already know how quickly Lake Gennesaret (the Sea of Galilee) can change from being a flat millpond to a stormy sea – the wind will suddenly pick up and in moments, all is changed. Perhaps he knew it might happen; more likely perhaps he knew it would.

They are out there for some time, whilst Jesus has gone up onto the mountain to pray. The feeling of abandonment may already have

been in their hearts – the fishermen among them would have known how quickly the sea conditions would change, and yet their master has just sent them out for ages by themselves into the Lake. Jesus knows that testing times will come, for all the disciples, for all of us – how does our faith function when the troubled times are at their greatest? Their minds must have been in complete turmoil; in following the instructions of their master, in following his word, they are now in danger of their lives. Fear grips them – for the wind and the waves are terrible, strong enough to capsize the boat. What was Jesus thinking of by sending them out alone? And then, instead of getting better, it gets worse and fear grips them in a different way – when out of the morning mist, their master appears to them walking across the waters. Is this a ghost, they cry – terrified for their lives on multiple fronts now. Which is worse, the pounding of the waves and the crashing of the storm all around – or this ghostly apparition?

But the noble qualities of Jesus come to the fore now – the ones they will have seen previously with the crowds on the mountainside, when, tired and no doubt weary, he still had compassion for them – as sheep without a shepherd; compassion for their need to know and understand, compassion to heal those who were sick, and came in faith for that healing. His words here are, Do Not Be Afraid. The Son of the Father, the Omnipotent Creator of the world, is here in a most heroic way, overcoming the powers of chaos and destruction within the wind and the waves – as they will have remembered of their ancestors and YHWH leading them safely through the Red Sea ahead of the advancing Egyptians. Here are the powers of the Father, incarnate in the Son – the Messiah, the Holy one of God. The divinity of the act is strengthened further by the faithfully remembered echo of the theophanic phrase ‘I am’; Ego Eimi. Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.

Peter is keen to emulate the heroic Jesus, as indeed we might do with our own heroes day to day. But he is still uncertain, and that is shown at the outset – ‘if it is you....prove it’. But nonetheless, Jesus accepts and calls him to him across the water. As if to reflect the developing nature of Peter’s faith, indeed he starts to walk on the water like his master. But the realisation of what is actually happening, the doubts and fears resurface....as quickly as his feet begin to sink beneath the waves. He cries once more to his master, and Jesus’ love is there again – as it always is. Despite the lack of true, solid faith, Jesus will answer his cry for help – as he will always answer our own cries for help. And no doubt with that look of compassion and love which comes from this ultimate hero, the divine achiever, the noblest of individuals, Jesus reaches out and saves him. For all the courage that Peter feels he might have, and similarly too ourselves, it is as nothing compared to the saving presence of Jesus Christ.

For some, the ways of Jesus must have been comforting, reassuring; the Messiah coming with such care and compassion; such a saving presence – clearly showing the powers of God through his miraculous acts; but always with a heart to reach out and save whenever asked. For others it must have been ultimately completely confusing – when in their minds their Messiah was meant to come in a fashion more akin to our Marvel Comic book heroes – with superpowers, great enough to overthrow the tyranny and oppression of Rome and once more free the people of Israel. But as disciples of Christ who know the sacrifice that Jesus ultimately made, the most noble of qualities in giving his life for us, that we all might live; in the most outstanding achievement the world has ever known, we should hold onto the Gospel, the Good News brought by our original, and still present true hero in all our lives. But does that mean we can’t

also learn from the contemporary actions and heroes that I first described? Yes, I think we can. For if we are made in the image of God, and show the fruits of the spirit in the way that we act and work and live our lives, then we can learn from those who do so to such great effects by their dedication, endurance, hard work and sacrifice.

So let us applaud the heroes in our lives who show such qualities – as taking a right path in their lives in doing their very best, whatever their profession or work. When we see the goodness and righteousness in people's lives, ones who are so much in the spotlight, we can encourage others to follow – to turn away from the paths that keep us away from God and draw us into bad ways. Our heroes can help inspire and teach us the ways to bring God's image out of very selves – the very best we can be; and for some, to give first before receiving; for others to even sacrifice oneself for the sake of others as Jesus himself did.....all the time bringing God out and visible in this world; for God is love and when our everyday heroes go beyond what is asked for, for the sake of others, they exercise that love for others as ourselves. And for this we should be thankful to our ultimate hero – Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen