

2 Epiphany  
January 18, 2009  
Fr. Bill McGinty

## “Called to be a Hero!”

The last week has been a week for thinking about heroes and for obvious reasons. I suppose that we all need heroes in our lives. Usually what passes for a hero in the media, is often a sports figure or personality, but often their feats are highly paid and too often they turn out to have feet of clay. So, my great soccer hero of the sixties, George Best was one such character. On the soccer field he could do anything, off it, he was an alcoholic, a womanizer and died far too young. Some one once asked George what he did with all the millions he earned: he replied: “I spent a lot on drink, night clubs and women and squandered the rest.”

Real heroes, as we learnt this week are made of sterner stuff. Calm, resolute, they go about their business in a professional manner and put the safety of others ahead of their own.

In our first reading today we come across the person of Samuel for the very first time. Samuel is a unique figure in the Old Testament. He is the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. In today's story we learn how Samuel is called by God from an early age. Samuel's call is where we get the word vocation from, voco-vocane in Latin meaning “to call.” Samuel's mission is a precarious one. It is his job to lead a young Israelite nation, surrounded by her enemies, to Statehood. Up until then Israel was a loose collection of tribes, who came together when there was a battle to be fought. If certain tribes decided not to turn up, the battle was lost.

Samuel led the tribes into Kingship starting with King Saul and more successfully with David. Part, judge, leader, prophet and spy Samuel lived through perilous times. He secretly anointed David while in fear of the wrath and anger of Saul. However, nothing ever deterred Samuel from his mission. From boyhood to death he was resolute in carrying out God's commands. In that sense he was indeed a hero.

Paul in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading demonstrates another kind of courage in taking on the Corinthians because of the immoral way they live their lives. Corinth is a Greek Sea Port with a reputation for its bars, drink, nightlife, and wild women. No one has ever taken them to task or spoken to them as Paul does in this letter.

Have you ever been in one of those situations where people are behaving badly and no one does anything? I was once on board a train from London to Glasgow a 600 mile journey. The train was packed. Three young guys in their late teens or early twenties were rampaging through the train, drinking beer, cursing and knocking passenger's luggage around. People were horrified, even scared. But no one did or said anything. Eventually, they passed through my carriage making a lot of noise and stood at the end by the door abusing passengers.

Passed me down the aisle, came a uniformed soldier. He was tall and thin, his buttons and pins said that he was a first Lieutenant. He walked up to the hooligans and addressed them in a firm steady voice: “as an officer in the British Army” he said, “I am empowered to arrest you in the name of the law and her majesty's Government. Unless you sit down and remain silent that is precisely what I will do. Do not give me the opportunity of drawing my weapon or adding to the charges you already face.” That's what happened. The hooligans sat down sheepishly, while the whole train applauded. Heroes do the right thing at the right time while others simply think about it.

So it happened that days after his Baptism Jesus went to Galilee where he found Phillip. As the story tells us he said to Phillip “Follow me.” And Phillip immediately follows him.

We might find that strange. The first thing we tell our children is “do not talk to strangers, yet alone go off with them.” Jesus however recruits Phillip and Nathaniel relatively easily. What was it about this young Rabbi from Nazareth that attracted the Apostles to him? In Zefferelli’s film “Jesus of Nazareth” the actor Robert Powell engage people at a very intimate level. He cuts down the space between them. He focuses on them and gives them his full attention. They believe that even in the midst of a crowd Jesus is speaking directly to them.

We read about this sort of charismatic leadership with cult leaders today. But, with Jesus it is different. Cult leaders bend people to obey their decisions. Jesus teaches people to make their own decisions, to accept what is good and reject what is evil.

In 1962, 47 years ago I left home and went to a Junior Seminary high up in the English Pennines Mountains called Shrigley. They don’t have Junior Seminaries anymore. But in those days I had this romantic notion of being a missionary somewhere in Brazil, probably paddling a canoe up the Amazon River fighting off crocodiles, Parana’s and natives with long blow pipes.

Over the next five years, I met many alumni who came back to the college after working as missionaries around the world. All of them had great stories to tell and we as boys were eager and earnest to hear them. Today, 47 years later boys who I studied with, played soccer, sang in choirs and celebrated the Eucharist with each and every day, are still working in those far away places.

Fr. Peter Newberry runs five hostels for homeless Chinese street kids in Hong Kong, Fr. Felix Gowicki, a Polish boy, has just returned after a lifetime of working with orphans in the Philippines. Fr. Michael Scott still works as a missionary priest at Jaguar Falls on the Oregow River in Brazil. Fr. Dennis Higgins teaches in Namibia in Africa. My old friend Brian Jertue teaches theology to would be priests in Tanzanika. The list goes on and on. Their work is selfless. For them there is no recognition. If they get home it might be every ten years or so. Parents and siblings die in the interim. Ask any of them why they chose this life and each of them will recount a story from their boyhood that is so similar to today’s stories of Phillip and Samuel. God called them and they responded.

The call of God is not unique to priests or missionaries. God calls people in this church each and every day. Maybe we are not all called to be missionaries, but we are called to be heroes. Heroes are what our children see when we guide them to do the right thing. A hero rises at 5PM and takes care of his family. A hero fights cancer and lives or dies with an unbreakable spirit. We are all in little ways called to be heroes because we each chose to follow a hero in Jesus Christ. Now and then, as with the “Miracle on the Hudson”, something happens that reminds us all that sometimes the good guys win. Sometimes the human spirit conquers. I imagine this week that many newspapermen said to themselves: “That’s the kind of story that brought me into this business. How proud I am to be a newspaperman.”

We too, as Christians can look back at today’s readings about Samuel and Phillip and say to ourselves: “That is he kind of story that brought me into the business of following Jesus.” In a way it refreshes us and with that fresh spirit we are resolved to march on into the future and what Christ and his call has in store for us tomorrow.

And just in case you are wondering I did not make it to the Amazon or to Brazil. I made it to Scotland, Malta, China, Africa and a little place in the USA called Milford, Pennsylvania.

Amen+

