

# Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church

## Lake Worth, Florida

Proper 16A [Saturday Evening, August 23, 2008]

Canon Richard T. Nolan

### *“HEROES VS CELEBRITIES?”*

*a revision*

*Matthew 16:13-20*

Last week I was a bit surprised about all the hoop-la concerning the 31st anniversary of Elvis Presley's death. I recall well his impact in the 1950s, including my father's contempt for him. On one occasion Bob and I were visiting my parents' suburban home on a weekend away from our college. When we were about to leave for an evening in Boston, my mother burst into tears, saying, "Richard, you're *not* going into Boston *that* way, are you?" I appealed to our advanced age (of about 19) and left the house Elvis-like in my dark leather jacket, jeans, and fashionable, glistening long hair; Bob was similarly dressed. Years later the Beatles came along, as well as others I've since forgotten. Of course, now it's predictably Barbra Streisand, Johnny Mathis, and Sara Brightman. I suspect that this is as contemporary as we shall ever become! In any case, I can't say that we were ever swept up in a fanatical adoration of entertainers, however appealing their talents. We have never joined anyone's fan club. Entertainers and other celebrities, however admired, were never our heroes.

Why do we need heroes, people we greatly admire, at all? It has been suggested that heroes help us define, develop and live by particular values; they inspire us to be like them. Someone has said, "Tell me who you admire and I'll tell you who you are." The choice of heroes, therefore, is a very important matter, because who we choose as a hero often determines and reflects our own character. The prospect of my mother and father's only child becoming a wannabe Elvis was no less than hideous to them.

A commentator has noted: "In today's culture, from rock stars to movie stars, from sports stars to politicians we have substituted celebrities for heroes. Celebrities from whom we expect little and sometimes get less. Celebrities, after all, are a part of our throwaway culture. By definition they are simply here today and gone tomorrow and replaced by new celebrities. So anxious are we as a culture to find someone we can place our love and loyalty with, that we place our love and loyalty from time to time, and instant to instant, in the riotous parade of the newly famous and the already nearly forgotten. And when we lose them, nothing is really lost, for their successors have already taken over the next fifteen minutes of fame. The celebrity can only attract curiosity and imitation of him/her self where the real hero sends us to the source and end of his vision and dreams. This search for hero is especially true in times of anxiety and uncertainty. And anxiety and uncertainty is a natural and integral part of the childhood and adolescent experience. Our problem is that we often look at celebrities to find out what our values should be and when we do, we don't look high enough."<sup>1</sup> At their best, our cultural celebrities, idols, and so-called icons are sadly lacking! In addition, their fans waste countless dollars buying their products and images.

Genuine heroes don't settle for perishable awards. They live and work in the world, but they live by the timeless values of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and humility. While prominence, wealth, and power may come their way, accumulating such awards and winning in endless, often ruthless, competitions are not their goals. Authentic heroes may attract attention, but they direct that attention beyond themselves; moreover, they reflect noble values in their own daily lives. Heroes help us embrace and aspire to values that we thought we might not be able to live up to.

Heroes can be found among teachers, counselors, and scientists; they may be discovered in our religious and historical traditions and among classical artists. They are able to be found among honest business leaders, justice-seeking legal professionals, and courageous politicians standing above the *status quo*.<sup>2</sup>

In tonight's reading from the *Gospel According to Matthew* we hear of two first-rate heroes: Jesus and Peter. Jesus asks who people think that he is? The replies include names of revered prophets, heroes of ancient Israel. The really important question, however, is to his friends: "Who do *you* say that I am?" Peter declares: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" What a remarkable affirmation! Peter knew that God's "Anointed One" was to free Israel from its oppressors and establish a peaceful political order. Yet, with extraordinary, graceful insight Peter saw in Jesus the godly depth required as a precondition for external human freedom and political peace. In this pivotal proclamation Peter redefined "Messiah" as one who would both console *and* challenge, the one who would call for a right orientation of hearts and minds as prerequisite to social liberation and political accord. In a real sense every generation of the Church rests upon Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of God. Peter remains a moving, heroic example of how a warm-hearted, impulsive, gifted but very imperfect individual can be won over by love, deepened by nurturing, disciplined by hardship, and engaged by God to be an outstanding servant, and for us a significant hero.

While most people today look rather desperately to celebrities for inspiration only to be disappointed by their major failings, would it not be more prudent to look to the living Christ as the ultimate, universal champion, an unparalleled hero? Would that the General Mills company had seen fit to place his likeness on Wheaties boxes! Imagine Jesus Christ depicted as the global, exemplary hero for all humanity. *His* followers (those who are adventurous lovers of God, neighbor and self) are freed from the enslaving fanaticism of idol worship.

I am convinced that the New Testament portraits of Jesus are sufficiently illuminating for us to discover the rich meanings of Christ the Hero. *Nevertheless, I readily admit that none of the Christian Churches that I know of have presented him in engaging ways; some images are downright damaging to the human spirit.*

As a Christian community, you and I may choose to continue to grow in our understandings of his significance for redefining and shaping our lives, the Church, and the world. In the "Word Made Flesh" heard and shared this very hour, you and I may detect the dynamic, liberating love of God. Time after time we are nurtured as our Heavenly Father's own community while we listen to his Word, share the Eucharistic bread and wine, and reflect carefully on the Gospel's meanings for our daily lives. We do this, in the words of another, so "that the story of our lives which we write might become increasingly consistent with his; that we may in fact become ourselves, the selves that God had in mind for us from before the creation of the world - so that we might increasingly become those unique persons we are."<sup>3</sup>

No abstract idea this Word, this Risen Messiah. No temporary celebrity, this powerful, dependable person. No delusional daydream, *his* world. And, no gloomy masochist, *this* prophet. Rather, you and I experience, as did Peter, God's living, transforming presence and power through Jesus Christ, the ultimate hero, the one Foundation of the Christian Church.

Indeed, "the choosing of heroes ... is a very important matter, because who we choose as a hero often determines and reflects our own character." Who are *your* heroes?

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<sup>1</sup>Charles F. Harper, "My Hero Forum" at <http://www.myhero.com/myhero/go/forum/harperfull.asp> .

<sup>2</sup>insights paraphrased from Charles F. Harper, *ibid*.

<sup>3</sup>John B. Coburn, *The Story of Jesus Christ and Your Story*, p.42.