

Sermon for All Saints 2011

Lesson 1 - Matthew 23: 1-12

Lesson 2 - 1 Thessalonians 2: 9-13

The media have dubbed it the Arab Spring. Across the Middle East and North Africa in the last wee while we have witnessed regime change and political change all across the Arab world. Popular uprisings have seen the political landscape in various nation and continents tuned on their head.

The latest is of course the hugely significant changes in Libya - a country for so long under the power of Colonel Gadaffi but now entering a new period in its History.

The week before last some of you like me, may have been somewhat upset, indeed sickened, however at the scenes of lines of people queuing up to take a look at the dead body of the former leader. In my view it was bad enough that Gadaffi had not been kept alive to stand trial and answer some questions, but to see the mutilated body paraded and then put on show goes against my view on human respect. And yet, for many who bought a ticket it was not revulsion on their faces - it was joyous glee observed in the huge grins. Of course I suppose we can say it was a cultural thing – acceptability is viewed differently across the world.

I wonder if what we witnessed going on could be described as a reverse hero worship. It's not uncommon in the Arab Nations in particular for us to witness a frenzy of popular and passionate support shown towards those who once led these countries – often as dictators. It's Hero Worship. Even in Libya – it's not long ago that Gadaffi's supporters were out weaving flags and carrying photographs of their leader. We saw the same in Iraq with an almost worship like support of some to Saddam Hussein. We see it in Iran and Syria too. Of course these leaders had. Have enemies but they had, have loyal supporters too. When we observe that support it can look to us very much like a form of hero worship; sycophantic infatuation! In the last week I think what we observed on the throngs who were going into an almost ecstasy as

they got a glimpse of the former leader's body is a 'reverse hero worship'; a passionate and over-joyous reaction to the death of an almost myth-like dictator.

Hero Worship – or its reverse – is not uncommon in the world and even in our own culture we can recognise it. Be it a leader of an Arab Nation, or in our own case a form of infatuation towards celebrity, we recognise that Hero worship is evidenced in the interest people take in certain people. Our popular culture, fuelled by magazines, tabloids social networking particularly - facebook and twitter and blogging – indicate a social fascination with certain people. Sometimes footballers, sometimes, actors, sometimes singers, sometimes mere socialites – stories and pictures and news about certain people flood into our lives. Even their very names trigger a fascination – we have become entrapped in a culture of celebrity hero worship or indeed its opposite as we take pleasure from the demise or error strewn activities of these peoples lives.

On this Sunday near All Saints day it's appropriate for us to reflect on Fame, popularity and the way we establish and promote fascination for particular people. How are heroes created in our perspective? What value do we place on wealth, reputation, gene pool as opposed to value in relation to activity and good deeds?

We might ask what makes a Saint? What makes a person praiseworthy, or fit to worship or appropriate to emulate?

In our faith – Jesus is the Hero we worship? He is the one we submit to the one we are to emulate? In thinking about all of this I want to ask this question:-

Do we say that Jesus should be given such hero status because he is the 'son of God' or because of 'what he did in his life and death'?

Is it enough to say that because Jesus is the 'son of God' the people of the world should fall at his feet, proclaim him King, wave flags and

shout Hosanna and generally adore him? Is it his name – his title - that in itself demands our devotion and absolute loyalty?

I would say NOT!

What if Jesus ‘Son of God’, despite his birth-right ended up living the life of a rogue?

Now some of you may say - well hang on Keith that could never have happened as Jesus is/was God and so he could never have drifted towards the dark side to use Star Wars language – but let’s just say ‘What if’. What if he ended up a thief, selfish and arrogant, a racist, full of desire for self-power, intent on the destruction of his enemies and the massing of power and wealth for himself? What if he had become a Gadaffi or Sadaam Hussein?

Would it still be right to worship him to make him a hero in our loves, to fall at his feet in adoration? Would the fact that he had the name ‘of God’ and was God’s pronounced son be enough?

Of course not! And it’s not just me saying that; Jesus as good as said it himself!

In the picture of Jesus and the Pharisees in today’s reading we meet Jesus in a state of deep upset and we might say the angriest we ever see him the in all the gospels. He is deeply, deeply offended by the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. I like the straight talking translation in the Message version:-

*“Their lives are perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next. They love to sit at the head table at church dinners, basking in the most prominent positions, preening in*

*the radiance of public flattery, receiving honorary degrees, and getting called 'Doctor' and 'Reverend.'*

Jesus is angered by their thirst and lust for power, fame and popularity. He admits that some of their teaching is profound and sensible but he says 'practice what they preach and not what they do'!

It's not enough for Jesus to be adored by accident of birth-right by fame and fortune or by the title we have been given. It's not a given that people should be respected for their job-title, their power, their wealth, their past achievements, their learned wisdom, or their natural talent. For Jesus what matters more – in fact what matters as of crucial important is what people do with their lives. Respect only comes says Jesus by the deeds and activities of our lives.

Thankfully we have a King – a Hero who is most remarkable in the good deeds of his life. Even to the point of martyrdom on a cross – not for self glory or self publicity but for the sake of others. Jesus was/ is the son of God but what matters to us is that this 'son of God' lived a life of deep humility and integrity full of deeds which originate in the very loving nature of God himself. Jesus the Christ, is not just a name, he is a way of existence. He is not just a hero – the good deeds of his life were and are heroic.

God calls us to a life of humility! All too many of those who opposed Jesus liked the place of honour; Jesus pointed out that when the love of God is truly in a person, that person is a person full of humility – a person whose words match their actions.

Perhaps one of the most well known stories of a person so full of the love for God and whose humility shone in all he did is Albert Schweitzer:-

*A man who arrived in 1953 at the Chicago railroad station to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. He stepped off the train, a tall man with bushy hair and a big mustache. As the cameras flashed and city officials*

*approached with hands outstretched to meet him, he thanked them politely. Then he asked to be excused for a minute. He walked through the crowd to the side of an elderly black woman struggling with two large suitcases. He picked them up, smiled, and escorted her to the bus, helped her get on, and wished her a safe journey. Then Albert Schweitzer turned to the crowd and apologized for keeping them waiting. It is reported that one member of the reception committee told a reporter, "That's the first time I ever saw a sermon walking."*

Here is a man whose words matched his actions.

Jesus is in that same category. Of all people the Son of God is the supreme example of selfless love and humility.

It is to this love that we are called as God's people.

It is not enough to say we are a Christian or live as if in some charade of godly living. It is not enough for others to point to us and say that person says he is a Christian or that person goes to church. The only thing that matters to God is that our actions do all the talking; that our deeds in life point to who we are.

God has given us the opportunity to use our lives to bring value to others. Let's not let God down.

Amen