

Heroes

Alfie and his best friend George found themselves in Northern France, penniless, hungry and lost. When these seventeen-year-olds came across a deserted orchard, they crept inside and climbed an apple tree. Sat high on its gnarled branches, Alfie crunched into its crisp golden fruit. "That's delicious, that is," he spluttered. "And look! It's golden."

George laid back on the thick veins of the tree's twisted boughs, and chuckled as the juice ran down his chin. "We should give these a name," he said. "Maybe 'Golden Delicious.'"

In the late September warmth, Alfie and his childhood friend sat and ate and laughed together until a brief but eerie calm descended. Crack! Thump! Twigs snapped. Leaves crackled. A bang echoed from the distance. Alfie sat up, stared at George and – for a timeless heartbeat – the two of them froze.

Another crack. George fell from the tree. Motionless he lay on the French soil, with an 8.2mm hole in his head where the brass-coated lead from a marksman's Gewehr 98 rifle had done its work. The year was 1916. Alfie and George were not just cheeky teenagers, but infantrymen of the South Staffordshire Regiment.

Since that incident, seventy-five years had washed over Alfie. He groaned a little. "And that's how we invented Golden Delicious apples." Then he grinned and winked. He was now enthroned on a plastic commode, the iron-framed portable toilet used in the retirement home where I was a care-worker. "Give it a good scoop," he said, as I wiped his back side.

It was my first day as a care assistant. I was then seventeen years old – the same age as George when he died – which is why his now elderly friend had recounted that story to me. But once Alfie was all cleaned up and back in his high-backed Parker-Knoll, he grabbed my arm and glared right at me. "I want my life to have had meaning."

With all the wisdom my seventeen years of stupidity and lack of confidence could muster, I frowned at him and said, "Of course your life has meaning." I had no idea what I meant, but I really did mean it – the knee-jerk reaction of

a naïve boy, out of his depth on his first day of work. Looking back, Alfie no doubt could see that well enough, and yet he seemed genuinely reassured. He sat back, gazed into some non-existent distance and smiled to himself.

Three days later, I walked into his room and found it empty but for the reek of cleaning fluids. Alfie had gone to be reunited with his childhood friend.

Alfie had been a war hero. He was welcomed home from France as a hero. But for me, what made that man heroic, was his capacity to be vulnerable with an idiot teenage boy. To be open, and honest, and vulnerable. And that man, who I knew for less than three days, has made a permanent impact on what I became and who I am.

This term we are looking at heroes – what is a hero, why do we need them, or want them? What is it about our culture that makes us believe we need something called ‘role models’? what kind of people do we want to have an impact on us? And why?

Of course, there are worthy heroes and unworthy. Heroes have their origins in Greek mythology. And here, they play an important role in making sure that the masses behave properly. The heroes are those who are favoured by the gods because of their looks, their wealth, and their status. The Greek gods aren't remotely interested in ugly, penniless nobodies – in Homer, these people are the object of ridicule. No, the heroes we admire also happen to be those who rule Greek society. And we cannot be like them. Most of them, of course, are self-centred, spoilt, deceitful, power-hungry psychopaths – behold, the Hero. Great role models for a dominance hierarchy.

In today's bible reading, prophets are praised as public heroes only by those who represent the very authorities that killed prophets. Prophets, after all, are the folk who sacrifice themselves to speak truth to power – who challenge the unquestioned prevailing ethical norms of their society, and draw attention to alternatives nobody wants to hear. In their own day, they are dismissed as insolent, irrelevant, utopian. They were not just people who foretold the future – instead they say, here is the future that your current behaviour is leading you. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said,

“To us a single act of injustice--cheating in business, exploitation of the poor--is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world.” Prophets voiced their anger.

Jesus drives an enormous wedge between the heroes of the past (the prophets) and those who claim to honour those heroes in the present (society’s moral legislators). Why is it that we honour prophets only when they are safely within their tombs? Why is it that we would rather worship heroes, than listen to them? Why is it that we keep a safe distance between us, and those who might actually be worthy heroes? Because following their example is difficult. After all, I am a coward. And so are you! And that is fine! We all show heroism, we all show cowardice – and dividing the world up into heroes and cowards is a stupid game.

One of my favourite satires from the 90s was a US comic strip called, ‘Normal Man’. In a world of superhero alpha-male types, Normal Man was an unremarkable, slightly pathetic figure who continually found himself in unfeasibly dangerous situations. And each week, he would need to be rescued by some super-hero figure. It was a brilliant spoof. And questioned the legitimacy of hero worship at all.

And we might question that, even today – with people we might deem heroes as worthy as the prophets. Think of Martin Luther King Day – a public figure despised by the leaders of his own day but venerated by those of ours. Once he is safely in his grave, we can hail him as a prophet without having to hear him. we can approvingly quote ‘I have a dream’, and unwittingly oppose that dream. But should we even hail someone so great as Martin Luther King as a hero? It was Ella Baker, the civil rights activist, who once said that ‘Strong people don’t need strong leaders’.

In saying that, she seems to echo Friedrich Nietzsche – who would have seen hero worship as a means of herd-control, forcing the unreflective punditry of a shallow society to swallow whole the high-sounding moral norms of the day.

No – there are no heroes, and there are no cowards. There are just people who sometimes give in to fear, and sometimes show great courage.

We all know fear, and – consciously or otherwise – we all give in to it. There are voices we dare not hear, eyes we dare not meet, truths we dare not speak. There are, and always will be, tasks we dare not face, decisions we dare not take, support we dare not offer, knowledge we dare not gain, lessons we dare not learn.

I know plenty of heroic soldiers too afraid to be open with their partners. I have known firemen collapse into tears because they are too afraid to have honest conversation with their own children. And I think of Alfie – traditionally we would call him a war hero, but a man I knew for only 3 days has left his voice ringing in my ears for over 3 decades, because he could make himself vulnerable. Almost, an anti hero.

The ultimate anti-hero is the Servant of that first reading from Isaiah – probably referring to the nation of Israel as a whole, but finding further fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth.

Today we celebrate epiphany, which is why some of our music sounds Christmassy – this is when the wise men from distant lands came to show reverence for Jesus. Was it hero worship? Maybe it was anti-hero worship. The CEO of multiverse, exposed in all his vulnerable – I tiny, fragile, two-legged mammal. And a mammal who grew up to be a prophet and more than a prophet, to expose himself to vulnerability, and humiliation, and shame. Jesus, the messianic anti-hero, worshipped as the model and source of strength, and hope, and love.