

# Who are the heroes

---

Psalm 37:1,4-9; Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Cor 1:10-18; Matthew 4:18-25

Rev Jean Shannon

Many years ago on a leadership program, the teacher asked us to name some great leaders. People called out names like Menzies, Kennedy and Churchill. Then she asked us, who were the people we admired. Who would we like to be more like and surprisingly the class offered a totally different set of names. They called people like Bishop Tutu, the Dali Lama, Dame Quentin Bryce and Nelson Mandela.

It was almost like they were looking at two different worlds.

So it is with heroes. We can name people of giant status, grand gestures like generals and soldiers, but who knows the name of anyone who got out in their tinny and pulled people from their roofs<sup>1</sup> in Lismore; made sandwiches and took them to the fire front or dipped in their purse and added the few coins short for the shopper embarrassed at the till. We don't build statues to those people.

It's like we are colour blind. Colour blind people don't just see the world in black and white – or even grey. They just see something entirely different from what others see. Where you see pink, they might see brown. We see the mine engineers and rescuers as the heroes but not the courage of those below. The courage that kept others afloat both emotionally and often physically. We worship them for having *survived* but not for sustaining others. The 'real' heroes were the rescuers – not the victims.

January 16<sup>th</sup> was Martin Luther King Day in the USA which honours a specific leader that we have learned from. We are coming up to Australia Day which honours what? We get very confused messages about what it supposed to mean...and that is because for many years, we were unsure about what it was supposed to **do**. If it supposed to unite us, then why do we give honours out to the rich and famous? How does playing a sport really, really, well, unite us? With great fanfare, bread and circuses, we anoint an Australian of the year while behind the scenes hundreds of people you may not have heard of are quietly rewarded<sup>2</sup>. (actually we do know someone<sup>3</sup>) Their names are buried in the list of politicians, public servants and

---

<sup>1</sup> They were ordered NOT to do that with threats of fines

<sup>2</sup> Some we actually know as local heroes

<sup>3</sup> A member of the congregation, Corinne Nicolson, was awarded an OA for her work in the community

industry magnates who have manipulated the system, hired others to write applications and generally self-rewarded for glory. They get the statues.

So what is Australia Day supposed to **do**? I'm not going to answer that but rather remind you that last week, I hinted that Paul's letter to the Corinthians was generated because all was not well. They were a divided congregation.

It seems that some people approached Paul with information that sharply conflicted with the progress report sent to him by the congregation. I said last week, they were afflicted with 'isms'.<sup>4</sup> Parts of the congregation had aligned themselves, perhaps too closely, with various leader's teachings and beliefs. They became followers of Paul or Fred ...or whomever. Paul reminds them that they cannot be divided in Jesus. That they are not Baptised in the name of someone else – but rather, in Jesus' name.

I also said last week, this is natural. Congregations are made of people. People normally align themselves behind various movements. They may see themselves as social activists, progressives, conservatives, evangelical, contemplatives or whatever. Problems arise, when there is conflict in worship preferences or in power struggles as they did in Corinth. It often happens when the 'teaching' of one area is seen as more important than the reason we are here: to be his arms and legs, to worship God, to love one another and to seek justice.

Dr King wasn't trying to convert people. He was trying to bring justice into the world. He wasn't just fighting for black Americans, he was fighting for everyone enslaved and illtreated. He fought for economic and civil rights; for the underpaid and exploited – no matter what their faith or colour.

Dr King told the audience that, if God had let him choose any era in which to live, he would have chosen the one in which he had landed. "Now, that's a strange statement to make," King went on, "because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around.... But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars."<sup>5</sup>

Darkness and light – how we see things differently. These themes are woven through all of this week's readings.

---

<sup>4</sup> Evidence in the congregation's letter 1 Cor 7 – which is mostly a morality lesson inspired by the various Christian voices they had been following

<sup>5</sup> Heather Cox Richardson, 16 Jan 2023, Letters from An American, [January 15, 2023 - by Heather Cox Richardson \(substack.com\)](https://www.substack.com/p/letters-from-an-american)

Light does not merely illuminate, it brings change to a situation. Our readings tell us in both Isaiah and again in Matthew, the people living in darkness have seen a great light. ...for those 'living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.'<sup>6</sup> And our Psalm starts with, "The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? Light doesn't just illuminate – it brings change. John the Baptist and Jesus preached change! That's what "repent" means.

Who are the heroes? Heather Cox Richardson says it is neither being perfect nor doing something spectacular. We are regular, flawed human beings who sometimes choose to put others before themselves, no matter what the cost, even if no one will ever know.

In her letter from an American Cox Richardson said, "It means writing in your diary that you "still believe that people are really good at heart," even while you are hiding in an attic from the men who are soon going to kill you, as Anne Frank did..."

Anne Frank's small diary echoed around the world and made us focus on what really happened. Cox Richardson continued...

"Sometimes it just means sitting down, even when you are told to stand up, as Rosa Parks did."

Rosa Parks jump-started the civil rights movement with the courage to sit down on a bus rather than stand at the back as required of all southern blacks. I rode the bus with my Nonny many times and remember the awkwardness. Does she sit with me in the front because I'm white? Or take me to the back and suffer the stares of the white folks in the front? There was no right place for us both on that bus. Cox Richardson continued...

"None of those people woke up one morning and said to themselves that they were about to do something heroic. It's just that, when they had to, they did what was right."<sup>7</sup>

It means dropping your nets and following Jesus without knowing what was to come. Bringing the light to someone else – on a bad day.

---

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 4:16

<sup>7</sup> Heather Cox Richardson, 16 Jan 2023, Letters from An American, [January 15, 2023 - by Heather Cox Richardson \(substack.com\)](https://www.substack.com/p/letters-from-an-american)

Sporting heroes may make us proud of our country but it is as ethereal as the different 'isms' – in the Corinthian congregation. It does not change us or make us better.

A sporting hero is only as good as his or her last win...unless they can bring light. Winning is not enough in my books. I think so many children learned from Ash Barty's dedication to hard work and humbleness in success. She didn't make it look easy – but she made it look possible. It wasn't what she did on the court as much as she did off. Girls everywhere, especially indigenous girls, were inspired.

Today's Matthew passage is important. It is the beginning of Jesus' ministry – the first step on the road. The climax of the next few weeks will be the sermon on the mount and in the time between, we see the crowds grow and Jesus grow as he brings light. The journey begins as he hears of John the Baptist's death...so we already know it is dangerous – and he chooses to go anyway. He chooses to take his words into hostile regions. The people living in darkness in Matthew's gospel refers to the Jewish population. Matthew was writing for his own people. He knew what he had to say would be not welcome but still felt he had to bring some light – to tell the story. Jesus knew it was dangerous but still, He began.

Like John the Baptist, Jesus preached change. Dr King could do nothing else but follow.

This Australia Day, let's put our 'isms' aside. Let us see ourselves for who we are and celebrate as one – all voices – not just the survival of our first nations people or the flourishing of colonists – or the milestones of migrants but rather the light that each has brought that makes us, us.

Let's preach change.