

Fifth Sunday of Lent B 2024

Fr Michael Gimena

Some people insist that their hero must never show any sign of weakness, never display hesitation or doubt or uncertainty or fear. The hero must at all times and in all circumstances be strong, brave and unflinching. But real heroes are not like that.

To take just one example. Martin Luther King was a leader of civil rights movement in America – a difficult task which he undertook reluctantly. It brought him hardships, insults, imprisonment, and threats to his life. In the end it claimed his life – he was assassinated.

During that struggle he knew many low moments. He tells how one night he reached rock bottom. His home had been bombed. As a result he felt he could not go on. He was tired of the insults and injuries. In this state of exhaustion and despair, he threw himself on his knees before God, and prayed: *'Lord, I have taken a stand for what I believe is right. But now I'm afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership. If I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I'm at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I can't face it any longer.'*

He says that at that moment he experienced the presence of God in a way he had never before experienced it. That experience enabled him to continue the struggle.

Martin Luther King is no less a hero because he showed that he wasn't made of stone. Heroes who never show weakness or vulnerability are simply not believable. Nor are they of much use to us as models. We can't identify with them or imitate them. When, on the other hand, we meet someone who is hesitant, reluctant and fearful, we find that person much more believable. This element of reluctance is of the essence of the matter. The saint or martyr who seeks his fate with eagerness never rings true. We love to see the man behind the hero.

The Lord himself didn't go to his death with any kind of assurance. He had his lowest moment in the garden of Gethsemane when his soul was so deeply troubled that he said, *'My soul is ready to die with sorrow.'* St John has no account of his agony in the garden in his Gospel. But what we catch is an echo of it in today's Gospel where Jesus says, *'My soul is troubled.'*

In some respects the agony in the garden is the most comforting part of the Gospel because it shows Jesus at his most human. Previously, he had gone resolutely to his fate. But now that the dreadful moment has come, he was so distressed that his sweat fell to the ground like drops of blood. He did not contemplate suffering and death with a stoical calm. He was appalled at the prospect. From where did he get the strength to face it? From prayer, and therefore from God. Someone defined courage as *'fear that has said its prayers.'*

One would not be human if one didn't feel fear when danger threatens. Courage is not never feeling afraid; it is feeling afraid and going on in spite of it. *'A person without fear is no hero; the person who overcomes fear is.'*

Jesus' agony in the garden gives us comfort and hope in our low moments. There is no need to pretend that we are made of granite. We must not hide our weakness

and fear. Like Jesus we must turn to God in heartfelt prayer. And we must also seek human comforting as Jesus did when he asked Peter, James and John to watch and pray with him.

To conclude we ought to look at the words from the Letter to the Hebrews: *'During his life on earth, Christ offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears, to the one who had the power to save him out of death, and he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard.'*

Today let us pray for the grace of strength, courage and perseverance in facing the challenges of life. Amen.