

Fame, fantasy and faith - can Jesus really take on Robocop and the Spice Girls?

A game of two halves

Kevin "The Pieman" Pressman keeps goal for Sheffield Wednesday, and has done so for many years. He struggles gamely against two major handicaps - his predisposition towards obesity, and the fact that when the ball enters the Wednesday half his defenders usually play the "headless chicken" gambit. Nonetheless his enthusiasm remains undiminished, and he is often to be found training after hours - though not just practising removing the ball from the back of the net, as some have cruelly suggested. Not many people dream of being a Kevin Pressman - a David Beckham, perhaps, or a Michael Owen, but not a "pieman". Kevin is not an icon.

Welcome to the machine...(Pink Floyd)

Iconic status is about celebrity, and celebrity may sometimes owe little to talent and even less to character. It is generally conferred by the media on people whose faces fit, rather than on - for example - ageing goalkeepers from unfashionable clubs, however loyal or determined. The creation (and, occasionally, the destruction) of 'stars' sells copy, and some of the public seem ever willing to suspend their critical faculties and embrace whoever is flavour of the month. If a superstar of sport or culture should fall from grace, there is no shortage of potential replacements who will gladly accept media promotion.... at least until they are firmly established as icons, when they may rediscover an interest in privacy.

If it is a cynical process, it is also one without unwilling victims - save when the media turns from patron to persecutor. Many readers and viewers, their appetites whetted, eagerly devour every morsel offered. When it comes to their icons they are always hungry for more, however bland or tasteless the fare. This hunger, stimulated and partly satisfied by the media, is not really about admiration for gifted individuals, though it may begin that way. We are not invited, week after week, to consider the merits of, say, a particular singer or an actor. We are invited to become obsessed with them, to lust after them, to envy them.

...What I really, really want (The Spice Girls)

Envy, when aroused, might focus on wealth, fame, looks or power, but it is what these attributes are perceived to bestow that is the real object of desire. People are crying out for personal significance. They see in their icons what they most want for themselves - a life that matters. They want a life in which mundanity and mediocrity are banished, where their inconsequential actions are important, where the world wants to hear what they have got to say. They buy into someone else's dream almost as if, by so doing, they can somehow bring their own nearer to fruition.

Increasingly, the 'iconoclass' is drawn from the public itself, with contestants from shows such as 'Big Brother' attaining stratospheric (if transient) fame or sometimes, abysmal notoriety. What possible interest a considerable percentage of the population could have in such people was once a mystery, at least to me. They all seemed so desperately ordinary - hardly the stuff of legends. But what eluded me would have been plain to those of more perception - it was their very ordinariness that made them irresistible. Here was the boy or girl next door, untalented and previously unknown, now famous and feted by the media. Here was the dream brought so close it could almost be touched - the possibility of celebrity for anyone.

The disappointed and the dangerous

If the longing for personal significance is often behind an infatuation with celebrity, it is commonly the motivation of celebrities themselves. As John Stott put it, "People who 'succeed', because they attain wealth, fame or power, do so mainly because they are driven by an inner urge to self-aggrandizement." Such self-obsession, though never benign, is not

usually considered too harmful. Those who climb the ladder of success will not find self-worth on the top rung, but if happiness and contentment prove illusory, they can at least be miserable in comfort. Others, who fuel their fantasies of significance through the media offerings, may experience nothing worse than an undercurrent of frustration. Sometimes, though, the quest for personal significance can be far more sinister. It is likely to head any serious list of motives for terrorism, and is certain to be above the espoused 'cause' - so often merely a vehicle for this compulsion.

Gardener's question time - will Sam make the Heroes' Hall of Fame?

Heroes are somewhat different from icons, not least because they seldom exist at all. Genuine heroes are as rare as rocking-horse dung, yet the demand for them is such that fictitious ones dominate literature and the film industry alike. The appeal is similar to that of icons, though perhaps broader - even the youngest children are catered for with cartoons featuring superheroes. The adult versions may not always enjoy the same supernatural powers, but their physical prowess or use of technology ensures victory over seemingly impossible odds. These superficial creations define heroism only in terms of violence, albeit violence against 'evil'. Often their solitary virtue (if so it can be called) is a willingness to do battle against the bad guys, and even this is sometimes motivated by the desire for revenge. Nobility of spirit has few roles in Tinseltown, where the formulaic hero has reigned for decades. The movie moguls' idea of the heroic may be shallow and reflect poor values, but it seems to be what people want...and to persuade them otherwise really would be a mission for Captain Implausible.

Had the movie-makers wished to experiment with a different value for heroism, they needed to look no further than *The Lord of the Rings*. Those who are familiar with the book (and my apologies to those who are not) will know that the real hero is Sam the gardener. The success of the quest crucially depends on Sam at several points, but he is the antithesis of the Hollywood hero. Undersized and slow-witted, he has no wizard's power nor Elven sword to bring to the fray. He has no momentous agenda - the defeat of Sauron and the restoration of the monarchy are the concerns of the more conventional 'heroes'. Sam's motivation is his love for his master. He goes on the quest voluntarily - as a servant. Facing every kind of danger, and armed with little more than faithfulness and determination, he nonetheless plays an imperative role in the *Grand Design* - and he does it all for love.

Of course, the self-sacrificial Sam will not be portrayed as a primary hero in the final movie instalment of Tolkien's book. We know this, because - though the film is on celluloid - the heroic format is engraved in stone. Sam's brand of heroism is simply not tried and trusted box-office material.

Meanwhile, back in the real world...

Christianity (I thought I'd mention it) has its own values, its own icons - its own Hero. For those who know him, Christ has scaled the heights of heroism - and stands unchallenged on the summit. Moreover, if love, faithfulness and servanthood better define the heroic than isolated acts, perhaps it is mainly his followers that make base camp on that same ascent. Every one of those who have chosen the path of the Master has his assurance - writ in blood - of their profound personal significance...yet we should not scorn those who embrace the pale imitations of the secular media. They do so because they have needs, and those needs are not being met - or even addressed - by the church. If people are retreating into fantasy, it is because the truth is not presented in an acceptable form, and sometimes not presented at all.

Those deluded by the dream-factory are willing accomplices in the process, rather than being merely gullible, and they will not trade their comfortable mythology for what they see as another. As a matter of fact some of them are very perceptive and can tell, for example, when personal significance is rooted in 'ministry' rather than in Christ's sacrifice. For Christianity to touch such as these, it has to offer more than logical propositions and cerebral arguments. It has to offer more than a dream, even a wonderful dream. Contagious

Christianity happens when actions are consistent with the stated belief. Put simply, Christianity has to be modelled. It has to be seen to work. That's how it all began, and that is the only way it will successfully continue.

Telling it like it is

Christians, though, do have a duty to be able to offer a cogent account of their faith. If the Apostle Paul was anything of an example, we also need to have an understanding of different viewpoints and be able to engage people on their territory. If that territory is 'heroism' we have a world-beater - the trouble is, he hasn't got a decent PR team. "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" just doesn't cut it - and neither does it convey the truth. Jesus, above all else, was and is passionate. More than that he is relentlessly, unequivocally passionate. There is not a single recorded instance of Jesus being insipid, timid or banal. There is gentle and loving Jesus in the bible, an expression - not a negation - of passion.....but there is also 'in your face' Jesus who confronted the Pharisees and kicked over the tables, and 'no surrender' Jesus who drank the cup of suffering down to its dregs so we wouldn't have to taste it. Gentle Jesus, man of steel would be nearer mark. This same Jesus - who overcame death itself - bids us follow and, alarmingly, claims that we can and must become like him. Jesus the author of life - the beginning and the end - is so often sold short by the very people for whom he gave his life. If he is to be rejected, let it be for what he is, not for what he isn't.

The Prime Directive

Our greatest obligation, however, is not to be found in correcting misconceptions of Christ (even ones fostered by the church), and certainly not in challenging media values. The primary responsibility of the Christian remains what it always has been - the relentless and unswerving pursuit of an ever-deepening relationship with God. Through this comes both love, and the power to model genuine Christianity. No argument is stronger than these.

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