

JESUS OR ACHILLES?

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The best laid plans.... Before we left for Scotland, which by the way was a magnificent tour with 22 members of this church; and before I left for San Antonio, Texas to help lead a worship and music conference for Presbyterians in the Lone Star State – I submitted the title of today’s message, “Jesus and Achilles.”

My goal and I thought a very attainable goal was to view the movie “Troy” before today so that I could use the current ‘movie of the summer’ to take a look at two heroes from antiquity: Jesus and Achilles in today’s message.

I say the best laid plans because I did not see the movie and thought I should be up front about that at the get go. I did read some reviews of the film – which I will not bore you with today. And I did re-read Bernard Knox’s introduction to Robert Fagles’ award-winning translation of *The Iliad* which the movie is based on, I won’t go much into that today either.

What I’d like to do is for us to entertain a comparison of these two archetypal figures. I admit, it is a little bit of a contrived comparison, not to mention like apples and oranges, because Jesus and Achilles lived in two different epochs.

This is a chance for the historian in me to say the context matters. History matters. And from the perspective of the present when we look back at great figures what we often miss, unless we do our homework, is the richness of the conversation a great historical figure is having with the values and beliefs of his or her time.

I don’t mean this to be a history lecture, but isn’t this what the Jesus Seminar does so well? They have introduced us to the historical Jesus. They have helped us understand what Jesus said and did in new and deeper ways because they have revealed the society Jesus was living in.

If Jesus and Achilles lived at the same time in the same culture, it would be comparing apples and apples. Like comparing George Bush and John Kerry. But they didn’t.

Jesus lived at the start of, “the common era.” Achilles lived, or rather Homer who wrote about Achilles, lived in the late seventh and early eighth centuries BC. So comparing them is like comparing George Bush and Ulysses S. Grant.

Nevertheless, there is a certain value in looking at the two side by side. At least directors Mel Gibson and Wolfgang Peterson are giving us the opportunity to do so. Two of the splashiest movies of the past two months are “The Passion” and “Troy.”

The other piece to the conversation today is the epoch we live in. This past week, in Texas, I referred to that great painting of Picasso that hangs outside the Security Council chambers at the UN entitled, “Guernica.”

Picasso painted it because after the Nazi’s destroyed the village of Guernica with their latest war technology, the world stood silent. His outrage caused him to paint the horrors of war not to celebrate but condemn war.

So when Colin Powell stood in front of the “Guernica” two years ago to make a case for a pre-emptive invasion of Iraq and the State Dept. covered it in drape it appeared dishonest.

One of the folks in Texas told me she and many in her community were completely behind the President, that we needed to be in Iraq and that she thought my statement was biased and political.

I told her we have children of this congregation who have served in Iraq or may yet serve and while I pray for them I also pray for an end to that war. And if Jesus isn't against war then I misunderstand what Jesus is about.

Here at the start of the summer, when the war is escalating in Iraq as the June 30th hand over date approaches I'd like to give us some things to contemplate. We are after all citizens who elect the officials who make decisions on our behalf about things like war. There has been remarkably little public debate about the war. As Wednesday June 30 and more bloodshed loom over this week I'd like to give us something to think about.

Achilles lived in a world that was in a constant state of war. Great cities were ringed with warlords who either supported the reigning warlord or who were waiting for their opportunity to defeat the reigning warlord.

Not fighting in war was simply not an option for Achilles or his generation. Homer, who gave this great classic, was helping his time, and as it turns after 2700 years of *The Iliad*, he helped all time to reflect on war, on the human condition, on what makes for noble and heroic living.

Some people think that our world is no different from Achilles' day. Some think that we still live in a world that doesn't have a choice about war.

You have to be willing to go to war to redeem injustice. If a Hitler or a Sadam Hussein rise up and grab power you have to be willing to stop them with force.

There will always be Hitlers and Sadam Husseins so we will always have war.

I am not saying this is good or bad or even true, I am just saying this is how the logic of the war machine goes. *The Iliad* is as relevant today, some say, than it ever was.

When Bruce Penner who has brought us these wonderful African drumming songs today offered his art...it fit perfectly with the direction I wanted to take in the sermon today. He warned me that the piece we just heard, the Kelefaba was a song whose context was war. Was I sure, he wondered, I wanted this in worship. I said it would be 'perfect.' Maybe was one of those moments of synchronicity. The Kelefaba as a song for those lives lost in war, has a strong resonance with our conversation this morning.

Homer would have liked this song too. For if it is anything his story is about loss. It is a tragic story of how a young and gifted warrior, Achilles, with no choice not to fight, how this warrior does fight – on his terms, in his time – not in wanton destruction. He checks from letting his rage overtake him. Finally, he enters battle to avenge the death of his friend Patroclus and to uphold the honor of the Ageans.

Admittedly, once he enters the fighting he does so with great gusto. He seems to love to fight. “It is well,” said Robert E. Lee watching the Union general Hooker lead his troops into a surprise attack and certain slaughter, “it is well that war is so terrible or we should grow too fond of it.”

So Achilles is a product of his environment. He is a war machine, but he kills with principle and with courage placing himself on the front line of battle – as our military leaders today do not do I might add. Achilles on the front lines risks his own life in war to uphold and protect what he believes in.

And it is through this heroism of courage and principle that Homer says men, because it was the male species who were doing the fighting then, men, attain glory for their courage and codes of honor if they have the character to be true to them like Achilles. Such men, Homer said, would be remembered for all time.

In this sense, you might say Achilles is the ultimate hero for a world, ancient and modern, in which war is a given, a fact of life.

But Jesus is another matter. Jesus lived in another time. Jesus lived 8 centuries after Achilles and saw the futility of war. Jesus was not focused so much on war as he was on peace. Jesus was not focused so much on human glory as he was on giving God the glory.

This is literally what he says in the long farewell discourses in the Gospel of John between chapters 14 and 17. Everything he did, he said, was to give God glory. Finally, by sacrificing his life, by surrendering to human violence, rather than dying by using violence, Jesus was pointing to God not himself as worthy of glory.

Jesus' point was that God is in charge, not generals, not presidents, and not popes. God's purpose for our lives is what we are called to embrace, not Adam Smith's or the Nike Shoe Company or President Bush's. And to do this we simply have to trust God's purpose and step out on a limb or onto a cross.

So while they lived in two different periods there is a certain diametrically-opposed quality to what Jesus and Achilles stood for.

I might even go so far as to say today, that we are called to be warriors for Jesus. I know that may sound a little militaristic if not cheesy given my theme. But how else do you talk about giving up, as Jesus does today in Luke, sacrificing your career, your family, your life to follow him. Heroic may be another word.

Homer's definition of a warrior is what the warrior fights for and how he or she fights. Achilles fought for his code of honor and for his clan with all the force he can muster. Jesus fought against the forces of darkness and fear to proclaim the love and kingdom of God. Achilles used spears and swords. Jesus uses his prayers, preaching, healing and trust in God.

There are two questions today. First, which is more relevant for the nation we live in – the example of Achilles or the example of Jesus?

Second, depending how you answer that question which is more relevant for the way you want to live your life? Are your answers compatible or contradictory?

The quote on the bulletin cover says it pretty well. Sometimes we build firewalls around ourselves so that the life Jesus calls us to live won't endanger us. For those who follow Jesus and are US citizens there is trouble ahead. Even though it will be dangerous, Jesus is the hero/warrior I aspire to follow as I trust all of us do with God's help. Amen.