

Heroes

Pat Marrin | Jun. 5, 2009 NCR Today



Because I am a cartoonist and know how cartoonists think, I anticipate a spate of political

art in the days ahead depicting President Obama in the form of an Egyptian monument. The Sphinx comes to mind. What the Egyptians think of our messing with their monuments is important but beside the point for most cartoonists. We are shameless when on deadline. Remember, you saw it here first.

The president will be depicted in monumental terms because he gave a very big speech in Cairo yesterday. His message was dead-on accurate enough to be criticized by all sides with a stake in the complex issues that plague the Middle East. The biggest criticism is that it was just a speech. Words disappear like a whisper in the desert if not implemented. A year from now we will know if anything will come of this.

Monuments of stone and metal can endure the test of time for decades, centuries, even millennia. The images and inscriptions from the ancient world that hold their place in our consciousness do so because they touch our need for greatness, heroic metaphor, stories that instruct us how to live.

The Lectionary has offered Christians the Book of Tobit this week, one of a number of stories preserved in the Bible to inspire us to fidelity and trust in God. The story of Tobit, a just man who observes the law and the tradition even in exile, has aspects of Job, Jonah, the Prophet Ezekiel and even elements from other wisdom traditions and the ancient Greek plays. In Sophocles "Antigone," burying the dead is forbidden, something Tobit does readily as an act of piety.

In the gospel for today (Mark 12:35-37), Jesus argues with the scribes about the Christ as descendant of David, the great hero of Jewish history whose past glory prefigured the messianic future.

As heroes come and go, the greatest image remains that of someone who is willing to lay down his life for a cause. Without his execution by hemlock, Socrates might have been just another storyteller. Without the cross, Jesus might have been a fine giver of speeches or one of many moral teachers.

In world events and in religion, words are important, but now the work begins. Heroes will be those who do it, whatever the cost.