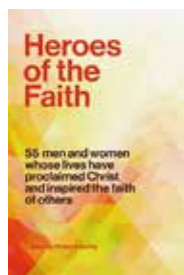


Heroic lives

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Heroes of the Faith – 55 men and women whose lives have proclaimed Christ and inspired the faith of others

Edited by Roland Ashby
Garratt Publishing



I CAN SAY WITHOUT A HINT OF exaggeration that this book fed my soul, and you would be a strange and cold fish indeed if it didn't do the same for you – at least in some measure.

Heroes of the Faith is a compilation of essays by a wide range of authors, from bishops (male and female) to social justice advocates, librarians, teachers, judges, poets and actors, in addition to the theological heavy hitters you might expect.

Most of the essays appeared in *The Melbourne Anglican* in recent years under the hand of long-time editor Roland Ashby, who was the brains behind both the series and this subsequent book. The brief he gave his willing scribes was to write an outline of the subject's life, reflect on the person's spirituality and talk about how this shaped their own beliefs and life.

You can gain some insight into a person by what they might choose to write about. If that is indeed true, then we may be in for some new learning.

The Ven Dr John Davis's essay on St Francis was deeply personal and lyrically written, describing as it did the significance of both the town of Assisi and the saint himself in the writer's call to ministry.

Dr Murray Seiffert's story of Aboriginal pastor Gumbuli Wurramara opened up a personal story of faith and ministry that made me deeply thankful to God and want to invite them both to dinner, while Dr Mark Burton – writing on Jürgen Moltmann – made me want to revisit Moltmann's works on my bookshelf. A respectful and affectionate portrait from Bishop Barbara Darling on Dr Leon Morris gave new insight into a man whose erudition and godly character have always been evident in his books.

Heroes of the Faith also includes the writing of people with voices perhaps more familiar to Anglicans in Sydney, such as Canon Dr Peter Adam (who writes on Bonhoeffer) and Rev Dr Brian Rosner (Luther).

The subjects themselves comprise a pantheon of heroes, some perhaps more likely than others: from Abraham Lincoln to N.T. Wright, Simone Weil to Thomas Merton, Michael Leunig to Catherine Hamlin, Henri Nouwen to J.S. Bach, Desmond Tutu to The Venerable Bede.

Heroes of the Faith is not intended to be a deeply theological book. It is meant to be an inspiring read, and it is. You marvel at the myriad ways God works in and through people to draw them to himself.

But any book of this nature is going to reveal foundational theologies as well, and they are many and varied. Of all the writers, it was only former Archbishop Peter Hollingworth, writing about Father Gerard Tucker, who specifically raised the "awkward" (in his words) question of the difference between a hero and a saint. What I regard as Scripture's clarity on this matter does not preclude the fact that there are a range of views, to which Ashby's book is testimony.

If you read *Heroes of the Faith* straight through rather than cherry picking its essays some themes become clear. There is a yearning among the writers for a closer walk with God (monastic reflective practices get more than a look-in) and, perhaps to a lesser extent, a closer walk with brothers and sisters in Christ. There is a yearning for unity in the Anglican Communion. And there is a yearning for humanity to take more seriously its responsibilities to look after God's creation and address persistent injustice, such as modern expressions of slavery.

I may disagree with some of the theological assumptions and perspectives – and possible solutions proffered – but it is worth reading and hearing these differing viewpoints.

Heroes of the Faith made me thankful for the work of God in his people. It educated me. It made me concerned. It made me sad. And it challenged me. I thank Roland Ashby and his writers for their candour and sincerity and, in many cases, their encouragement.

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we faintly make out a grassy scene before us. There are birds twittering and vague movement before a whistle brings a group of shapes closer to the camera. One face comes into focus – and it's the emotionally dead face of Saul (whose surname of Auslander, no doubt intentionally, means "foreigners" or "aliens" in German).

The camera immediately begins to follow our foreigner, and we see Saul's face – or trudge after the back of his head – for almost every subsequent scene. Around him seems almost constant chaos: people rushing, orders barked, bitter weeping, the sound of someone being beaten or shot, and myriads getting undressed for what you know will not be a shower as a German officer speaks of the good work available and the salaries they will receive.

Saul (Géza Röhrig) is a Hungarian member of the Sonderkommando – a unit of Jewish prisoners who were forced to help dispose of the bodies and ashes of those killed in camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the film is set. Before long Saul is mechanically removing the victims' clothing as they scream inside the chamber, then scrubbing blood off the floor on his hands and knees as their half-seen bodies are dragged past. It's a blur to him, and to the viewer, even as part of your mind screams, "Dear God, make it stop".

It didn't for him, and it doesn't for us. But what does change is the unexpected sound of ragged breathing from one of the victims – a boy who, while unconscious, has survived the chamber. The sound and sight draws the first spark of interest from Saul, but when a guard quickly smothers the boy he doesn't return to neutral. Saul goes and talks to the doctor – a fellow prisoner like himself – and asks to be given the boy. He wants to find a rabbi and provide a proper burial.

It seems insane. It seems impossible. But the desire fires him up. Before this Saul had automatically done as ordered, yet now he endangers himself – and helps other Sonderkommando planning an uprising and escape – as he searches throughout the camp and among new arrivals for a rabbi. Does he even know this boy? Does it matter? He has no name but he is a human being, and we see him.

Son of Saul is unflinching in the gaze it turns on this most awful of episodes in our history. Names and faces are often unknown, and in many ways irrelevant, as we and Saul experience the turmoil of the camp and its people together. Nemes has taken great care in orchestrating the human "choreography" we see, which is all the more important as there is very little dialogue.

This definitely isn't a film for everybody. The action is intense and grim, and the memory of some scenes will probably return and grasp you by the throat days later. It's an extraordinary piece of cinema.