

The Burghers of Calais

The Story

In September of 1347, near the start of the Hundred Year War between England and France, King Edward III of England laid siege to the northern French seaport town of Calais. 34,000 troops attacked the fortified city of 8,000 people in the hopes of gaining a secure port that could be used to re-supply the English army. The town's defenses held—for eleven months. When Edward III realized he was unable to breach the walls and conquer the city, he decided to cut off their supply lines and starve the citizens to death.

After the French King, Philip the Sixth, refused to help the town's people, the citizens of Calais tried to parlay a surrender agreement with Edward III. Eventually a deal was struck. Edward would spare the city and the citizens if six of the community leaders—Burghers—would turn themselves over as hostages in exchange for the freedom of the city. The first man to volunteer for the job was Eustache de Saint Pierre, a wealthy and leading citizen of town. Five of his friends and family members quickly joined him. Under the terms of the surrender, the six were to strip to their underwear, tie a rope around their necks, and exit the city gate with the keys to the gate and the castle in hand. They all expected certain death.

The Sculpture

Five hundred years later in 1884, the city council of Calais decided to honor the sacrifice of Eustache de Saint Pierre with a monument in the town square. What they had in mind was a statue of Eustache on a high pedestal, dressed in his finest clothes standing proud and heroic. The commission was given to a Parisian artist named Auguste Rodin and what he created was this.

Rodin read the history book and learned that there were six heroes, not one. He decided to capture the moment the six bedraggled and half-starved men walked out the gate with keys in hand. He imagined the 8000 exhausted, defeated, but grateful citizens looking on from behind as the men trudged to their fate. The sad but noble face of the older, bearded man in the center is Sir Eustache de Saint Pierre. Rodin made the hands and feet of his subjects disproportionately large to create a sense of the weightiness of the decision that rested upon them and pulled them to the ground. To Eustache's left and behind him were two other older men both carrying keys. They stand proud and determined. What gives the sculpture its energy is the range of emotions depicted on the faces of the men. The person behind Eustache has his head buried in his hands and is weeping. Another young man has his arms outstretched, mouth open with the look of anguished disbelief on his face. Another turns his head to look back on the town as if to say a forlorn good bye to his family. As a group they are vulnerable, conflicted, yet heroic.

Reflection

There are eleven bronze casts of this sculpture in the world and one stands at the entrance to the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena. The first time I saw it I was deeply moved and felt drawn to the work; but it also left me confused. At the time I



didn't know the story, I had no idea what a Burgher was, where Calais was, or even who Rodin was. I remember looking at the face of the old man and thinking, this seems like the face of Jesus, but then I saw the rope around his neck and the other prisoners and that didn't fit the Jesus story. Later I thought, maybe this was a one of the disciples, i.e. Peter. But again, the other details didn't fit. (By the way, Eustache's last name—Saint Pierre—is French for Saint Peter)

On further reflection, however, I have decided that for me this is the face of Jesus and the story has a gospel flavor to it. Jesus said, "Greater love has no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends." God's Son, the embodiment of love laid down his life for us and whenever a member of our race lays down their life in true love for another, the face of Jesus shines through. Rodin grasped that truth. He was raised in a devout Catholic family, His sister Marie was a nun. Rodin's first vocation was to become a monk, but after four months in the monastery, the abbot decided his real calling was to be an artist and he helped Rodin find a studio. Finally Eustache de Saint Pierre was reported to be a man of faith. He was quoted as saying the following:

"Gentleman, it would be a great shame for so many people to starve to death, if there were any way of preventing it. And it would be highly pleasing to Our Lord if anyone could save them from such a fate. I have such faith and trust in gaining pardon and grace from Our Lord if I die in the attempt, that I will put myself forward as the first. I will willingly go out in my shirt, bareheaded, and barefoot, with halter around my neck and put myself at the mercy of the King of England."

As the Lord Jesus had done before, Eustache de Saint Pierre offered up his life and in so doing the face of Jesus shines through.

Secondly, I am moved by the depiction of heroism by Rodin. The city fathers of Calais wanted a hero strong, proud, and on a pedestal. Rodin gave them a community of conflicted, frightened men trying to live by faith. When we go to the gospels and look at Jesus, we see something very similar. Jesus came to earth not as superman, the man of steel impervious to pain. Rather, he came fully human. He experienced fear, anger, and sadness. He got sick. He had diarrhea. He bled when he was cut and he died when he could no longer breathe on the cross. The hero of the Bible is not a distant mythic figure. He is a gritty, gutsy man of skin and bones like us so that we might become one like him.

Thirdly, I am moved by the invitation that Rodin offers to us in his work of art. His original intention was that these slightly larger than life figures would be placed at ground level in the town square of Calais. As the citizens of the town had a chance to mingle and mix with their living past he hoped they would say. "Our ancestors are our neighbors and our models. In the day when it be granted to us to imitate their example, God willing, we will not fail them." The Lord Jesus offers us the same invitation. As he marched to Jerusalem and his cross, he invited his followers to take up their cross daily and follow him. He invites us to offer up our lives in ordinary, mundane, and on rare occasions, heroic service to others. He promises to be with us each step of the way. May we be inspired to follow him.