Most people remember Rosa Parks for a single, iconic act in the summer of 1955. On her bus home from work, she sat down as usual in the area reserved for black people. As the front (which was reserved for whites) filled up, the bus driver moved the "colored" sign behind Parks, and told her to move to the back to accommodate the extra white passengers.

Her refusal to move, and her subsequent arrest and dismissal from work, led on to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This 381-day protest ended with the US Supreme Court ruling that segregation on buses was illegal. The boycott campaign was co-ordinated by a previously little-known Baptist pastor, the Revd Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.

The stories of both Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King have been changed in the re-telling.

The way the story is now told, Rosa Parks is seen as an isolated heroine acting on impulse. Nothing could be further from the truth. A closer examination of the history shows that her defiance of the colour bar was a calculated act. Moreover, Parks was not acting alone. She had been active in the civil rights movement for over a decade, and in the summer of the bus incident, had attended a school in Tennessee for civil rights training.

As she said later:

People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.

Rosa Parks’ story is also distorted in another significant way. It is re-told in a way that downplays her faith. A new biography of Rosa Parks seeks to correct this, describing her as “a staunch and active Christian,” a lifelong member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church who was never without her Bible.

As Jon Kuhrt argues, the same distortions have affected our memory of Martin Luther King:

So frequently is King is referred to as a ‘Civil Rights leader’ that many people don’t even know that he was and always remained a Baptist Minister until his death. Despite the campaigning, the marches, the imprisonments and the Nobel prizes, almost every Sunday he would preach at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery or later on at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta.

It is understandable when people abbreviate his title from ‘Rev. Dr’ to ‘Dr’. But why did he even have the title ‘Dr’? It was because he had a PhD in theology.

The secularising of King’s legacy runs deep. My eldest son’s class studied him at school and he was taught all about the bus boycotts, the marches and the speeches. But not once did anyone mention that King was a Church Minister.
Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King are seen in our culture as heroes. A hero is someone who stands at the centre of the story – which is how our largely secularised, largely individualistic society understands both characters. In reality, their stories were embedded in a much larger story – the story of a community of Christians organising together for a more just society. And that story is itself embedded in God’s story – the story of our creation through, and redemption in, his Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Christianity does not seek to create heroes – people who stand at the centre of their story. Rather, it seeks to form saints – people who are part of a bigger story; people who know they are sinners, who know they are dependent on God’s mercy and God’s power; people who know that the deepest and most fundamental change happens when he is placed at the centre of things. Parks and King have precisely that quality, that genuine Christian sanctity.

Today’s Gospel reading tells the story of a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee puts himself at the centre of the story, imagining that he can stand before God on the basis of who he is and what he has achieved. The tax collector comes recognising that he is wholly dependent on God’s mercy. The Pharisee’s story is one of self-justification and self-satisfaction:

“I thank you, God, that I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous like the rest of mankind, and particularly that I am not like this tax collector here. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get.”

The tax collector, by contrast – just like the thief on the cross – casts himself entirely on the mercy of God: standing some distance away, not daring even to raise his eyes to heaven; but he beat his breast he says, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” And it is he whom Jesus tells us goes home at rights with God.

This parable reminds us that God’s grace is free. Indeed it is infinite. But that does not make it cheap. The lengths God goes to on the cross to redeem us from our sins shows us quite how seriously he takes sin – and therefore how seriously we need to take it.

In his epistles, St Paul is urging his readers to avoid two distortions of the Gospel. The first mistake – which remains a constant temptation for all Christians – is to behave as if grace is not free, as if is earned by our good deeds. St Paul reminds his readers that their salvation comes “not from yourselves, but as the gift of God”. The second mistake is to think that if salvation is a gift, we can now do whatever we like. St Paul rejects this equally forcefully. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to take up our cross, not to win our salvation, but in response to God’s great love for us. As St John reminds us, we love because God first loved us.

We love because God first loved us.

That is what inspired Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King: knowing that they were loved by God, and knowing the length and the depth, the breadth and the height – knowing the sheer cost of that love – the shedding of blood, the breaking of a body which we re-member at this and every Eucharist.

That is what motivates Pope Francis – a Christian whose words and deeds are capturing the imagination of so many in our own day. Quite rightly, he worries that such interest and
adulation will make of him a hero – a celebrity, rather than a man whose life points beyond itself. Asked in a recent interview to sum up his own character and identity, Francis replied:

The best summary, the one that comes more from the inside and I feel most true is this: I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon.

As his biographer Paul Vallely observes:

Pope Francis’ faith is deeply incarnational. He sees Christ in the faces of ordinary people and ordinary experiences. One of his closest aides told me: “He doesn’t see the poor as people he can help but rather as people from whom he can learn. He believes the poor are closer to God than the rest of us; they have a very personal experience of him.”

Pope Francis is compelling, precisely because he knows his need of grace – of God’s forgiveness, and of the support and wisdom of his fellow men and women, and especially the poorest among them.

It is often assumed that a consciousness of sin, of our need of mercy and forgiveness, is a burdensome, depressing thing. But there is a radiance, a confidence, in our new Pope which is deeply linked to that awareness of his sin and of God’s mercy. Francis knows, as we all need to know, that we cannot stand before God on the basis of our own achievements. There is nothing we can do which makes God love us more, and nothing we can do which makes God love us less. We are made right with God on the basis of a grace and a mercy that is freely given. Precisely because our salvation depends on God, we are set free – free to serve and free to love, without worrying about self-justification, or being poisoned by self-satisfaction.

That central Gospel truth is also what inspired Fr Basil Jellicoe – the priest educated here at Magdalen, formed in faith in these pews and at this altar. It is what led him to devote his life to the transformation of the rat-infested slums of Somers Town – the area near London Euston station which was served by the Magdalen College Mission. To have an annual Jellicoe sermon is not to make him into a hero, but to recognise him as one of the great company of saints – one of those frail and fallible human beings, so conscious of their need of God’s mercy, so overwhelmed by the grace poured out in Jesus Christ, that they cannot but love others in response.

The stories of the saints – be they the saints of the New Testament, or modern-day figures like Rosa Parks or Basil Jellicoe – provide us with great inspiration. If they were simply heroes, that’s where things would end. But the saints provide us with more than inspiration. Their lives present us with an invitation: to have something of that same transforming impact, to know something of that same confidence and joy, by placing Jesus Christ at the centre of the story of our lives. Amen.