

Noble Blood

In the name of him who comes in the name of the Lord, dear friends in Christ: the film *Braveheart* is a personal favorite of mine. It has all the classic elements of a great story: good versus evil, plenty of action, humor, some romance, interesting twists of the plot, loyalty among friends, betrayal by the less than brave-hearted, and at the last a redemption of sorts. If you have not seen it (or to refresh your memory if you have) it tells the story of a 13th century Scottish commoner named William Wallace who helped lead his countrymen in a war of independence from English domination. There's a lot going on in the story, but the underlying theme that holds it all together is a question asked by Mel Gibson who plays the part of William Wallace. It's this: What is it that makes a man *noble*?

The answer to that question in the 13th century (and indeed for 99% of world history) was the issue of pedigree. How blue is your blood? If you were descended from that very small favored class of people who held a hereditary title like the Duke of this or the Earl of that, and with it the legal ownership of certain lands and estates, well, then you were noble. If not, then you were a commoner, a peasant, a peon, a serf, a lowly person whose lot in life it was to serve those who were noble and to work their land for them. There were nobles up here. And there were commoners down here. And there was no mixing between the two. Nobles married other nobles and produced noble children; commoners married other commoners and had common children. And no one could move from one class to the other (at least not up, anyway). That only happens in fairy tales like Disney's version of Cinderella. And I say Disney's version because in the story as it was originally told, when the prince discovers that Cinderella is a peasant, he's aghast. He wants nothing to do with her. They *don't* get married and live happily ever after. Instead Cinderella is humiliated. She slinks back to her life of drudgery in disgrace. The story's purpose was to be a warning to presumptuous people of the lower class not to reach above their station in life.

But back to *Braveheart*, William Wallace embodies a different understanding of what it means to be noble. For him nobility has to do with character and action. Though low born, he is highly educated, honest, loyal, hardworking, decisive, just, and of course, brave. He's a natural leader. Men rally around him and look to him to give orders – which he does with confidence and to great effect. And he's not in it for himself; he wants to serve the good of his countrymen. Meanwhile the Scots who are called nobles, who have hereditary titles, couldn't care less about the common people. These nobles are portrayed as self-serving, greedy, conniving; forever wrangling among themselves for a bigger piece of the pie that the English king will reward those who serve him and take from those who rebel against him.

The man in the middle is Robert Bruce. He's a Scottish nobleman and the rightful heir to the throne of Scotland – but that title has been claimed and forcefully stolen by the king of England. Robert's father, a Scottish Lord, is infirm and cannot rule. He encourages his son to be like the other nobles and to seek only to increase his own land and titles by any means possible. If that means fighting the English in an attempt to regain the crown of Scotland, okay; but if it means helping the English against the Scottish rebellion, that's okay too. But Robert admires William Wallace. He wants to be like him: noble not just in title, but noble in character and action too. He wants to be a leader who's in it not for himself, but who serves the good of his people. At the same time he's torn. He's enjoyed the good life passed down to him. If he

goes all in, he could lose it all. And he fears that. He is to some degree as self-serving as the other Scottish nobles. The outcome of the story hangs on which way he will choose.

But maybe you are wondering why I am taking all this time to tell you about a favorite film. The answer is that the reason the story is so compelling is that it is an echo of the greatest story. That's the story of Jesus Christ who perfectly embodies both kinds of nobility.

Consider his pedigree: on the human side he is a direct descendant of King David and the rightful heir to his throne. He is born of noble blood. But as St. Paul reminds us in today's Epistle, he has a much higher pedigree than that. He is the very form of God. Unlike Adam who reached upward for the forbidden fruit in a quest to grasp godhood for himself, Jesus did not count equality with God something to be grasped. He already had it being as he is "*God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made.*" Such as the Father is, such is the Son: *God* fully and completely, in every sense of the term. There is no higher pedigree than that. No one could claim to have blood more noble than his.

But from that highest height of rank and privilege he reaches downward for the good of his people. He sets it all aside. He makes himself nothing, takes on the form of a servant, and has himself born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbles himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross – the most shameful, agonizing death imaginable. He does it not for the deserving; but for those who most emphatically do not deserve it, who indeed deserve an eternity of suffering in hell. He does it not for friends; but rebels, the enemies of God. He goes all in and loses it all because he is not concerned in the least about himself, but only with how he can serve lowly wretches and save lost sinners. Thus he shows himself to be truly noble not just of blood, but also of character and action.

And that's why his Father has exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is nobler than every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee in creation should bow: those in heaven, on earth, and even in hell; and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

By God's abounding grace and mercy we do bow our knees and confess his name. And confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior, we receive the blessings he came to secure for us: forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life in his kingdom. More than that, he makes noble as he is noble.

What do I mean? First that he raises our class. He moves us from the category of low born to high born not by birth, but rather by rebirth in Holy Baptism. By his noble blood shed for us, he makes us members of his royal family. The Church of the baptized he takes collectively to be his holy bride. It's the ultimate Disney version of Cinderella – without a fairy godmother to clean Cinderella up and make her ready for the ball. No, in this version, the Prince finds her filthy, poor, diseased, dressed in rags, and sitting in the ashes. There's nothing appealing about her. But he decides to love her anyway. He takes her, heals her, cleans her up, gives her a beautiful gown, and crowns her with jewels. He unites himself with her in holy wedlock. The two become one. And they really do live happily *forever* after.

His goal, however, is not simply to make us of the noble class, but also to make us noble of character and action. And this really is what St. Paul is driving at in today's Epistle where he says, "Have this mind among yourselves, *which is yours* in Jesus Christ". The person in the middle of this story is you. In Christ you are of noble blood. Your hope and desire is to be

noble like Christ in every sense of the term, not reaching upward as Adam did and fell, but denying yourself and reaching downward for the service and benefit of others as Christ did and who was later exalted.

And the thing to see is that Jesus is more than our example in this to show us the way to go. Having been united with Christ, *we do* share the same mind. His Holy Spirit lives within us. And he is constantly speaking to us assuring us of his love, strengthening our faith, leading and guiding our thoughts. He is encouraging us to go all in even if it means risking losing it all. And to that cowardly, selfish voice inside your head that says, "Hold back. Protect yourself. Look out for number one", he says, "Be silent. Repent. Trust me."

The outcome of the greatest story, the story of all human history, hung with Jesus on the cross when he chose the path of true nobility. In our daily lives, with the people with whom we come into contact, with the decisions we must make, may we who have been reborn of Jesus' noble blood and given the mind of Christ choose the same path, that we be fully noble as he is noble. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!