

Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?

Somebody gave me Richard Ben Cramer's recent biography of the 1930's to 1950's Yankee outfielder Joe DiMaggio – packed with more information than you would want to know. In fact, I'm not sure Joe would have approved of the account because it reveals him more often than not to be a miserly fellow, often sullen, untrusting of people who tried to get too acquainted – not someone you would find comfortable to be with. And then there were all the ups and downs of his marital life – culminating in his on again, off again tragic relationship with Marilyn Monroe.

And yet amid the upheaval of the 1960's Paul Simon of the Simon and Garfunkel duo bemoaned DiMaggio as a symbol of better times and better men, a time of heroes, with the lyrics: Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio? / ... a nation turns its lonely eyes to you / A-what's that you say, Mrs. Robinson? / Joltin Joe has left and gone away.

In other words, whatever the facts, prosaic or even shabby, DiMaggio was remembered – mainly because of his performance on the playing field – as a legend. And that's how I have always admired him because I grew up when he played for New York – I saw him bat a few times and it was worth the price of admission, the coolness, the straightness (no crouching or walking out of the batter's box, no wasting time), the grace of his swing and yet the power of it – and the dignity of his carriage on and off the field. Sure he had the statistics to make him famous – but there was something about the quiet, single-minded way he had of playing what was more than a game to him. Opponents didn't fear him; rather they respected him for the icon that he was.

Legend! I learned a long time ago that the word legend comes from the Latin word *legenda*, which literally means to be read. It originally referred to the brief life of a saint that was to be read during the daily liturgical prayers of a monastery. And since such lives of the saints were full of miracles and other wonders the term legend came to mean a mythical story – not so much historical as edifying.

And that's how Paul Simon recalled Joe DiMaggio – as a legend, someone edifying regardless of the less edifying facts of his life; there was a grace about him that transcended the ordinary. It seems Joe would not have understood himself to be a legend. He complained to Paul Simon about the lyrics: "What I don't understand is why you ask where I've gone? I just did a Mr. Coffee commercial, I'm a spokesman for the Bowery Savings Bank and I haven't gone anywhere!"

Paul Simon explained he didn't mean Joe was gone literally – but that he thought of him as an American hero and that genuine heroes were in short supply.

We live in what we call modern times when fact, not fiction, not imagination is required when we evaluate events and people. No more myths, please! That's one reason why many people no longer bother with the Bible; CNN tells the truth better. How drab! As believers we value legends – accounts of people that raise to the surface the better part of human nature: grace, commitment, seriousness, humor . . . goodness in extraordinary ways. And we need more legends – legendary people – even out of this congregation gathered here today!

Geoff Wood