

Horatius at the Bridge

On this first assembly of the New Year, 2014, I'd like to talk to you about an extraordinary feat of courage. The story I will tell you is based upon an account written by Livy, a Roman historian. Livy was celebrating a feat of courage that has inspired those who heard it ever since it took place, over 2,500 years ago. What happened on that day has importance not just because we should praise courage, but also because if it had not happened then nothing... nothing... about our world today would be the same.

Imagine a world where the Roman Empire was destroyed before it had even been created. Imagine a world where all the technological advances the Romans gave us had not happened. As a small example of the vast changes involved, no-one here would be speaking English – English is a Romance language which is derived in part from Latin. The world today would have been very different if one man, on a particular day, long ago, had acted differently.

Let me tell you what he did.

Rome, in its early days, was controlled by a neighbouring people called the Etruscans. They lived to the north of Rome, in an area then known as Etruria, which now called Tuscany. Finally, the Roman people could stand the oppression no more and rose up against their foreign rulers. The Tarquin Kings, as they were called, were driven out and a republic was set up in their place. For the first time, the Romans knew liberty. The Etruscans driven out of Rome went to their kinsman, Lars Porsena who was king of Clusium, to ask for his help. He was happy to give it - he put together a vast army with the intention of destroying these upstart Romans who dared to rise up against his kin. Rome at this stage in its history was barely more than a single town, surrounded by villages. The city itself stood on the banks of the river Tiber. The sweep of the river protected it on one side, high stone walls protected the other. The problem was on the river side. Lars Porsena advanced so quickly that the first the Romans knew of his coming was the line of burning villages on the horizon and the stream of terrified refugees that fled down every road to the protection of Rome. There was one bridge across the Tiber. If the bridge were abandoned, the Etruscan army would pour across it into the heart of Rome and all would be lost. The city would be burnt, its people sold into slavery. And more than that. All the future would change too. In burning that city, Lars Porsena would burn all its future – he would be destroying all that we benefit from today.

As the vast army drew up on the river bank the defenders fled in terror. It seemed the bridge must fall. But one man stood his ground. Horatius was on guard duty on the narrow bridge and he refused to run away. He pulled two comrades to his side – the bridge was so narrow that only three men could stand side by side. These three faced down an entire army. Horatius called out for the Roman people to pull down the bridge behind him. He and his companions would hold the narrow way until the last path into Rome had been destroyed.

So the three stood and faced down an army of thousands. The Etruscans charged the bridge where Horatius stood and the fighting was ferocious. The three fought side by side while behind them their only means of escape was being chopped down.

Finally, the bridge was on the point of collapse. Horatius sent his two companions back across the swaying planks. Then he turned to face the Etruscans alone. He would not leave his post until he was sure there was no way into Rome. The bridge collapsed behind him. He was on the wrong side of the Tiber with a furious army all around him.

Now he was sure Rome was safe, Horatius could think of saving himself. He turned his back on the Etruscan army and dived into the River Tiber. Exhausted by hand-to-hand fighting, in full armour and wounded in the leg, Horatius managed to swim the Tiber, back to safety. He had saved Rome.

It is strange to think that had one man not acted bravely, then the whole world would be different and worse than it is now. But when we pause to think about it, is it that strange? Everything we do has effects upon the world around us. We have no way of knowing what those effects will be, just as Horatius could never have imagined that 2,500 years after his death, in a cold land he knew nothing of, I would today be telling all of you about him and his bravery. Who knows what the effect of the decisions we make will be? Who knows what act of bravery performed by someone in this room will echo on down history and form the basis for an assembly in the year 4,500AD?

We all determine the future by what we do each day. Whether we do the right thing or not changes what will come. Who knows what the consequences of a act of kindness will be? Or the consequences if one of us stands up for what we know to be right.

But this is also true: the bad we do echoes forward as well. An act of cruelty or cowardice will have consequences which we know nothing of, but which cannot be good.

And sometimes the odds seem overwhelming... sometimes we are tempted not to try because it looks too difficult... sometimes we are tempted to avoid doing something because it looks like you are just one person and there are so many against you. If sometimes it seems tempting to run away... think of Horatius at the bridge, holding the line for what he believed in against a whole army. And think of the thousands of unknown and wonderful consequences that fan forward through history as a result of each and every one of the good things you do. And then, I encourage you on this bright morning of a New Year, go out and do the right thing, whatever the odds against you.