

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

July 7, 2013

Spiritual Ponderings

Faith & Film

Zero Dark Thirty

Welcome to a new month of Spiritual Ponderings and if you have been following my writings for a few years, you know that I devote the month of July to spiritual insights from movies. I do this for two reasons the first is that in their book *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham says this about the power of stories: "For spirituality itself is conveyed by stories, which uses words in ways that go beyond words to speak the language of the heart. Especially in a spirituality of imperfection, a spirituality of not having all the answers, stories convey the mystery and the miracle—the adventure—of being alive," and secondly I like to watch movies.

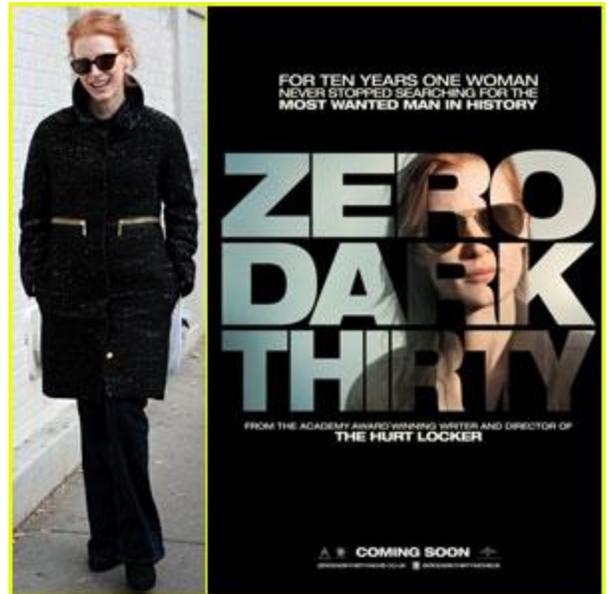
The first movie I would like to look at is a movie called *Zero Dark Thirty*. The movie is billed as "the story of history's greatest manhunt for the world's most dangerous man," and it depicts the efforts of the United States to hunt down Osama Bin Laden. I

have to admit it, that I have never watched a movie like this one. One of the reasons I found it was so strange was that I could remember many of the terrorists attacks that happen in the movie. This helped me realize so much goes on in our world at any time.

The first spiritual insight I would like to focus on is the idea of a "man hunt". The main character Maya relentlessly searches for Osama Bin Laden as if it was the sole purpose for why she was created. One is easily impressed by her dedication and relentlessness. As Catholics we believe that each of us is being hunted like Maya hunted Osama Bin Laden by God. The differences being we are not terrorists and God is not hunting us down to punish us but rather He is hunting us down out of love. As we see Maya and her team go into different god forsaken places it made me think of something Fr. Robert Barron said about God in his book *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation* wrote this: What most besets us, what stand most awfully between ourselves and God, what practically compels the curving in on the self that is the essence of sin, is the fear of death. And hence it is into that fear that the Word of God journeys. All of Christ's sallying forth into sickness, alienation, self-righteousness, and poverty are but preliminaries to the final assault on the stronghold of death itself. It is as though he moves first through the outer defenses, that is the myriad effects of sin, before coming to the citadel: the origin of all sin which is the terror of dying. And how does he fight? He fights by bringing to these dark corners the light of the divine compassion. He walks calmly into those places that are—so it seems—at the furthest remove from God and simply brings the divine presence; he approaches those who are—so they think—most alienated from the sacred, and he throws around them the everlasting arms of the divine mercy." In other words Christ went into god-forsake-ness to find sinners and that should invoke the image of the Good Shepherd. He does so out of love.

The second spiritual insight comes from some of the most disturbing scenes in the movie which are the torture scenes. The only thing I liked about these scenes was that it seemed that each of the torturers realized that they were doing were making them, the torturers, less human. Dan eventually gives up torturing and returns to Washington D.C. because he does not like who he is becoming. While most of us will never have the opportunity to torture the people like they do in the movie, I think it is important for us to realize that every time we call someone a name, hold a grudge, push, etc. that we become less human.

The third spiritual insight that I wish to point out is shown in the last part of the movie as we accompany the seal team in their attack on Osama Bin Laden's compound and that is war is not a game. I think sometimes with all the television



shows and video games we can forget that war is real. There is a very real sense that everyone on the mission might not make it back to base. We also know that if someone is killed that they cannot simply insert a couple of more coins in the arcade slot to get more lives. This should evoke in us an appreciation for the men and women who serve in the military and keep us safe and it should also encourage us to think of war as a last resort.

The last spiritual insight is that nothing on earth will ever satisfy us. After everything is said and done and Osama has been killed the closing scene of the movie sees Maya sitting on a huge airplane by herself crying. She could be crying that she had not succeed earlier, she could be crying because she is thinking of all those including personal friends who have died, but you get the sense that she is crying (or at least I did) it is because she does not know what she is going to do with the rest of her life.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

July 14, 2013

Spiritual Ponderings

Hunger Games

The next movie, I would like to ponder for spiritual insights is the Hunger Games. This movie was based on widely popular book series. The story takes place in a post-apocalyptic nation called "Panem." This country seems to consist of one capitol city and twelve more rural suburbs called districts. There is quite a difference between the capitol and the districts. The capitol is rich and technologically advanced while the districts or poor and often with little technology. After a failed rebellion against the capital city as part of the peace treaty each district would send one young man and one young woman between the ages of 12 and 18 to participate in a special gladiator fight to the death game. The contestants are chosen by lottery and the sole survivor also wins fame and wealth.



The first spiritual insight a person sees is the love that Katniss (the heroine) has for her sister Primrose. As Katniss volunteers to take her sister place as tribute/gladiator we cannot help but hear echo in the back of our Christian minds John 15:13:

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Katniss shows true love by sacrificing her life so that her sister may live.

The second spiritual insight one gains from watching the movie is that human beings do not always use their resources for good. For example we see all the technology in the capital city and in the arena: they have fast trains, various forms of advanced media, and the ability to change day into night in the arena but there are people starving in the districts. You are left wondering why someone has not used this technology to help the districts prosper. It is much different today? We have companies spending millions of dollars on entertaining us and on weapons but we still cannot come up with a cure for cancer or stop world hunger?

Another spiritual insight from the movie comes the fact that human sacrifice (gladiator games to the death) is taken place in a supposedly well-to-do society. Like the Romans who had conquered the known world had gladiator games and infanticide and similar to how the Aztecs and Mayans at the top of the civilizations right before the Spaniards came were all involved in human sacrifice. It was said that the Aztecs could sacrifice over a thousand people in a day. In some cases the human sacrifices were people who volunteered. In our advanced society we are killing children through abortion, we are experimenting on people in far crueler ways than the Nazis when we do embryonic stem cells, and we

are encouraging euthanasia now more than ever. There seems to be a connection between how much wealth someone or some country has to how it treats people. It seems like the more wealth the more people are not respected.

I think another important insight into this is the relationship triangle between Katniss and her two suitors. The first suitor is Peeta who was also a tribute along with Katniss. The other suitor being a longtime friend of Katniss named Gale who we are introduced to at the beginning of the movie and we can see he anxiously awaits Katniss's return. We see throughout the movie that Katniss does not know whether Peeta's feelings are real or not. Katniss really needs some time to think about what she wants in life and who the best person for her is. I don't think she gets that time though. Sadly though many people do get a chance to sit down and talk to God about the future but don't take God up on it. Each of them needs to remember that love is wanting what is best for the other even if it requires a sacrifice on their part. If Peeta and Gale truly love Katniss then they should only desire her happiness and not their own. God desires our happiness and allows us to choose not to follow Him because of that love. He respects our free will.

The last insight I would like to share with you is one that Peeta and Katniss both come to realize is important and that is not letting the circumstances of life change you. Too often we live life as victims. My life situation caused me to be this way which is false. We always have a choice to be the person we want to be. We may have to suffer for it but in the end we do have a choice. The following quote from Mother Teresa comes to my mind: "People are often unreasonable and self-centered. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you are honest, people may cheat you. Be honest anyway. If you find happiness, people may be jealous. Be happy anyway. The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough. Give your best anyway. For you see, in the end, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway."

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
July 21, 2013
Spiritual Ponderings
Faith & Film

And welcome back for another edition of Spiritual Ponderings. As we continue our reflection on different spiritual insights from movies, I found myself realizing that I really do not go out to the movies too much and so I signed up for a one month free trial to an online streaming company. The first movie I watched was a movie that caught my attention because I had already seen *The Avengers* and that movie being *Thor*. While there many things I did not care for in the movie (mainly because the scenes were so dark, literally, that I could not see what was going on, I did find quite a few spiritual insights hidden in this movie about a former Norse god who now protects the earth.

The first thing that caught my attention was the use of sibling rivalry to create the plot. It turns out that despite their deep love for each other Thor and his brother Loki are constantly trying to prove themselves to their father Odin who we discover loves them both deeply despite the fact that Loki was adopted. I could not help but think about a lot of problems in the world come down to human beings believing that their Heavenly Father's love is somehow limited and therefore we struggle to become God's favorite. Most people seem to take this desire to be the "favorite" and use force and violence in order to become powerful as if being the most powerful human being, he or she would receive the most



love from God (or the universe/fate/ or whatever their divine father figure is called). Others seem to take this desire to be the “favorite” and use it as a reason to sabotage others. I cannot help but think our world would be a much more peaceful place if we put aside this cosmic sibling rivalry and realize that we are all sons and daughters of one God who loves us each deeply. This of course is easier said than done because the Apostles were not able to set aside their rivalries despite walking and living with Jesus. Hope though comes from the stories of the early Church after the Resurrection and from saints who have learned and try to teach us that we are all one family.

The second theme that arises is that Thor believes that in order to be a good king he must be strong, braved and feared. He does not see how the virtue of compassion is needed to be a good leader and at the beginning cannot see the wisdom in avoiding war. He learns though that war is not some neatly contained board game and that going to war has unintended consequences where others who are innocent get hurt. Though his experience on earth he begins to discover that his father, Odin, had a greater wisdom about him and thus chose the route of peace.

I found my third spiritual insight tied in with Thor’s magical hammer. This magical war hammer was the source of Thor’s powers and he felt was his by right. His father Odin though takes it away from him and it teaches Thor that everything he has was a gift from his father. Everything we have is a gift from God. We should be thankful for everything we have especially before we lose it. Once Thor receives his hammer back he never takes his powers for granted again.

There is a lot of talk about “magic” and “science” and how in Thor’s realm they are one in the same. I could not help but think that “faith” and “reason” are not one in the same but they coexist together in a beautiful harmony in the Catholic Church. Nothing we believe in can contradict reason and we know that reason cannot contradict our faith. Blaise Pascal, the famous mathematician and theologian, says: “Reason’s last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it.”

As I have been searching for spiritual insights into movies for quite a few years, there seems to be a pattern emerging in super hero movies and that is the super hero’s willingness to die in order to save the world. We see with Captain America crashing the plane in the arctic, Iron Man in The Avengers taking the nuclear missile into the wormhole, and in Thor as he stands to fight the fiery metal monster. Each of these invokes in us though the idea of ultimate love “there is no greater love than to lay down’s one life for a friend.” (John 15:13). Jesus though of course actually lays down his life while the others don’t actually die.

Finally the last theme, I saw in the movie was best illustrated by Odin’s wife Frigga who counsels everyone to trust in Odin’s plan even though Odin has entered into some spiritual type coma. We are called to trust that our Heavenly Father has a plan even though sometimes it seems that He is not listening. In the end of the movie Odin’s plan works and we know that at the end of time the Heavenly Father’s plan will work also.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

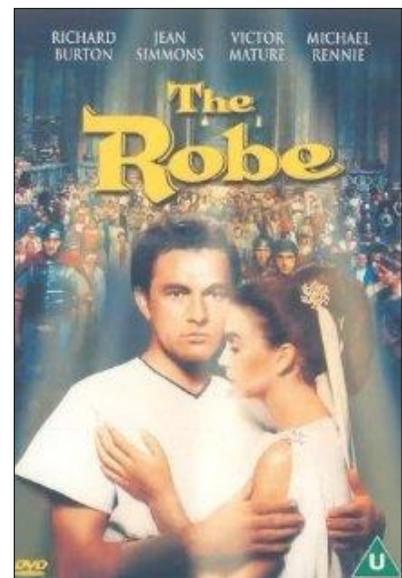
July 28, 2013

Spiritual Ponderings

Faith & Film

As we come to the end of the month of July, we also come to the end of our reflections on spiritual insights from movies. For our last film this month, I thought I would kick it “old school” by reflecting on a good Christian movie from the past. I know that most of the younger people will not have seen this movie so I encourage you to read anyway but also to rent the movie sometime in the future. The movie for today is the 1953 film *The Robe*.

It is important to realize that since the movie is historical fiction not everything in the movie is true but at the same time I think it gives great insight into the world around Jesus’ Crucifixion and the life of the early Church. The story focuses on a young and influential Roman named Marcellus Gallio (Richard Burton). Marcellus has the rank of tribune (pretty high office in the Roman



Army) and is no friend of the grandnephew (and future emperor) Caligula. One day in the market place Marcellus embarrasses Caligula and as punishment he is sent to Judaea and assigned to help Pontius Pilate keep the peace. Before Marcellus can get his bags unpacked he is ordered to report to the Emperor back in Rome for it seems that his childhood sweetheart Diana has pulled some strings to have him return safely. Pilate asks Marcellus to do him one favor before he leaves at the end of the week and that is to crucify three criminals one of which being Jesus of Nazareth.

Marcellus succeeds in crucifying Jesus and even wins Jesus' robe in a game of dice. He becomes convinced though that robe is possessed and that he has now been cursed for putting on the robe. Before he can do anything about it, his slave Demetrius takes the robe and escapes determined to join up with the followers of the dead carpenter.

In Rome Emperor Tiberius gives Marcellus and imperial commission to retrieve the robe and destroy it (hopefully ending the curse) but more importantly to the Emperor he is to get names of Jesus' followers so that they can be arrested and executed. In the midst of his journeys he meets up with his former slave Demetrius and the big fisherman (St. Peter). He realizes that the robe was not curse but it was his guilty conscience. He then becomes a Christian and is eventually arrested and martyred. Diana seeing his devotion to this "new" God joins him in his martyrdom.

Now that those of you have not seen the movie have an idea of what the movie is about here are a few spiritual insights. The first spiritual insight comes in the movie when Peter explains to Marcellus how Marcellus has already been forgiven by Christ. Peter does so by sharing the fact that Peter had denied Christ and was forgiven. Sometimes the best way to evangelize is to let people know how Christ has forgiven our sinfulness.

The second insight, I saw was how paralyzing Marcellus's guilt was and how frightening it must have been because he had nowhere to turn for forgiveness. The sad part was that he had already been forgiven by Christ on the Cross. Thank God for the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The third insight was just into the historical context of the early Church. I cannot imagine what it would be like to live life knowing that any moment soldiers may bust in and arrest me because I was a Christian. There are times, I think that it might happen in the future but until it happens, I cannot imagine it. The miracle is that the Church continued to grow. People don't risk their lives for an ideal so Christ's Resurrection must be true.

The last insight that I saw was what we sometimes refer to in Church as "grace builds upon grace." What do we mean by that? We mean that if we are good person God will make us better people if we allow him to. He will not help us to fly because flying is not a part of our human nature. Marcellus was able to convert to follow Christ because he was already a decent man and this is scene by how he treated his slave Demetrius.

