

REEL THEOLOGY - 1) "Invictus"
(Sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

Scripture Lessons:- Jeremiah 1: 4 - 10; Luke 2: 22 - 40

Jesus was still in diapers when his parents brought him to the Temple in Jerusalem "to present him to the Lord", as was the custom. And that's when old Simeon noticed him.

Years before this "righteous and devout man" had been told that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah with his own two eyes, and on this particular day, one glance was all it took.

He asked if he might hold the infant in his arms,

and as the baby's fingers played with his beard, this wise old man was heard to say,

"Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation..."

And then Simeon made this proclamation:- that this child squirming in his arms would be God's "light for revelation to the Gentiles..." He would transform the world...

Do you realize what is happening here?

Even though this rather strange festival we call "Candlemas" begins in the holy mystery of Temple worship, Simeon's words immediately shift our focus to the world.

As much as we would like to, we are not allowed to linger long in the sanctuary, because we know that this child who has captivated our lives, is to become "light to the nations" of the world.

// That is reflected in our own experience of worship in this colourful place today.

The music from the Russian tradition, which Peter has carefully woven through our service this morning, places us in solidarity with our sisters and brothers in Eastern Europe, men and women and youth who have remained faithful to the cause of Christ, even when it has been dangerous to do so.

And how can we worship God this morning without naming our prayer-filled concern for our friends in Haiti. The presence of this One whom we believe is a "light to the nations" moves now among the piles of rubble, sits with the homeless in makeshift shelters of cardboard and plastic, scrounges for food and water and basic medical care, hugs beautiful orphaned children wrapped in blankets arriving in Ottawa and Montreal...

The Holy One is wherever our sisters and brothers are suffering in our world...

And the beginning of Black History month tomorrow, is not only a celebration of a rich culture and tradition, but also challenges us to be honest about the insidious racism that still lurks just under the veneer of what we like to think of as our enlightened society. //

// When an Oakville high school principal disbands his boys' hockey team for the rest of the season because members of the team repeatedly verbalized racial slurs against players of colour on opposing teams, we know that even in our own neighbourhoods there is much yet to do. //

Maybe that is why the movie "Invictus" speaks to me.

In spite of its flaws, each time I have seen the film I have left the theatre moved and inspired.

Morgan Freeman plays Nelson Mandela, and Matt Damon is Francois Pienaar, the captain of the Springboks, South Africa's national rugby team.

The story takes place not long after Mandela becomes President of South Africa – his one and only term as President – his choice.

The country, as you can imagine, is extremely divided along racial lines.

Whites fear the new government which is now in the hands of the black majority, while blacks want revenge for the suffering and pain forced upon them by Apartheid.

If the country is to survive, the new President understands that he must create a climate that will help divergent people come together.

It is very difficult. When Mandela integrates his group of body guards, the black leader of the group, Jason Tshabalala is furious. But the determined President stands firm:-

“The Rainbow Nation starts here, Jason,” he says. “Reconciliation starts here. Forgiveness starts here.”

The nation is divided even over sports.

While blacks played soccer, rugby was favoured by white South Africans.

And because the whites cheered for the Springboks, all the blacks cheered for whomever they were playing against.

The Springboks are a pitiful team, but Mandela recognizes that with South Africa hosting the World Cup in a year's time, this was an opportunity to engage all citizens in support of the national team.

So the President invites Francois Pienaar, the Springboks captain, to join him for tea.

He wants the Springboks to be a means of beginning to break through the walls of hatred and prejudice that exist between blacks and whites.

As the team trains and plays, slowly the whole nation begins to rally around these underdogs.

Mandela instructs the team to go into the townships to conduct rugby clinics for black children caught in that horrendous poverty. Very reluctantly they go.

Little by little as they cautiously engage with each other, the boundaries between the races begin to soften. And when, in the drama of an overtime final, South Africa does win the World Cup, the whole nation erupts in jubilant celebration.

Well, just a couple of truths coming out of this film that I'd like to hang some thoughts on this morning.

The first is this:- It is the scene when the Springboks are taken to the Robben Island prison where Mandela had spent 27 years of his life. Here the tension between the racist past and the hopeful future becomes very real.

As Francois goes into Mandela's tiny cell, he stretches out his arms and easily touches both walls.

He realizes that the man who sat behind these bars now sits behind the President's desk, and he is reminded of something Mandela once told him:- that in the darkest days of his imprisonment what kept him going was the Victorian poem “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley.

“This poem helped me to stand up, when I just wanted to lie down,” Mandela says to Francois.

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,

I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

It matters not how strait the gate,
 How charged with punishments the scroll,
 I am the master of my fate:
 I am the captain of my soul.

In this film, being the master of one's fate, and the captain of one's soul not only fits well with a team that is carrying the expectations of an entire nation,
 but in some ways it also becomes the guiding light for a country that must overcome its internal struggles if it is to be one nation for all of its people.
 It has to do with courage, and tenacity,
 believing as our Canadian hero Terry Fox once said, that "dreams are made if people try."
 The team does rise to the challenge, wins the World Cup, and the nation begins to move on...

The second thing the film makes clear for me is that the forgiving spirit of Nelson Mandela has raised the bar for us all.

// Francois Pienaar expresses that for us on the eve of the rugby final.
 "What are you thinking about?" he is asked as he gazed out the hotel window.
 "I was thinking about how you spend thirty years in a cell,
 and you forgive those that put you there." //

That statement has the flavour of the gospel in it for me.
 Not only did Jesus teach about forgiveness, he showed us what it is to *live* forgiveness.
 Even as the life-energy was draining from his body, forgiveness was on his lips and in his heart. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do..." we hear him saying...
 I kept thinking of that as I watched "Invictus". Mandela got that... lived that!

// In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela has written this:-
 "I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity.
 No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite." (*Long Walk To Freedom*, p. 542) //

Once again we hear the echo of the Teacher from Nazareth.
 "Love your enemies," he urged his followers. "Pray for those who persecute you..."
 Mandela also got that!

Well, old Simeon, back in that Temple in Jerusalem, recognized that this baby would become "a light to the nations". And here we are, all these years later, among the people of earth who have found our own lives captivated by this man from Nazareth.
 On this Candlemas Sunday, as we gather around this table, we are one with our Russian sisters and brothers, and those of Haiti, and one with the First Nations people of our own land, and people of all colours and backgrounds and sexual orientations and ages
 - the "Rainbow Nation" of earth...
 Still we are learning how to muster the courage to forgive,
 believing, as Mandela did, that it is possible to love evil out of our world,
 so that in the name of Jesus we too can be a source of light -- God's light -
 for all people in this global village of earth. Amen.

