

WHAT REALLY MATTERS

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THE FIRST *Hobbit* film grossed over \$1bn at the box office. Gandalf the wizard tricks Bilbo the hobbit into joining a band of dwarves seeking to reclaim treasure stolen by an evil dragon. Along the way Bilbo matures, learning what really matters, what battles are worth fighting. But his companions' development remains arrested, so that when the dragon is ultimately defeated, lust for gold divides them. Only our hobbit returns home satisfied with his little treasure, handing the next adventure over to his nephew Frodo.

Much might be said about the meaning of Tolkein's epics. We find themes from Catholic social teaching in an age of capitalist exploitation, about reconciliation between races and concerning responsibilities of leaders... As a bishop amidst the child abuse crisis, I take great comfort from what is said about the trials and responsibilities of a ring-bearer. When Frodo says in *The Lord of the Rings* 'I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened,' Gandalf responds, 'So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides the will of evil. Bilbo was meant to find the ring. In which case, you were also meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought.'

If Tolkein speaks to those in authority he also speaks to 'everyman' about loyalty, courage and character. Redemption comes through joint adventures for noble ends. His are ecclesial epics, for none of our heroes achieves greatness alone. But for many people today religion no longer plays the prominent role it did in the imagination of the Inklings, and that must affect their understanding not just of 'The Greatest Story Ever Told', that of Jesus Christ, but of all those stories told in its shadow.

Dwarfed moral sensibilities and structures of meaning can make it especially hard for people to cope when the hard times come—the poverty, powerlessness or suffering that touches even the Halflings in Tolkein's cosmic struggle between good and evil.

The seventy-two return in our Gospel (*Lk* 10:1-12, 17-20), like the dwarves measuring their success by who or what they've subjugated. Jesus tells them not to rejoice in their spiritual power but in the heavenly rewards for their efforts. Clericalism is already in his sights, as it is clearly in the sights of his new Vicar, Francis. There's a lesson in that for us, not just clerics and religious bearing rings of authority, but the theologians and all those whose knowledge of the mysteries gives them a certain spiritual power: that our adventure includes not only the ring bearers and wizards, but dwarves and hobbits and regular people together in a joint struggle for redemption.

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The film musical of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* opens with ex-convict Jean Valjean freed from his chains but not from the cynicism life had taught him. Then a bishop he has robbed delivers the Good News: 'By the witness of the martyrs, by the passion and the blood, God has raised you out of darkness: I have bought your soul for God.' The film follows up with Jean Valjean kneeling in the bishop's chapel after receiving absolution. He prays fervently that the 'high plan' to which he has been called might be realized and concludes, as if quoting Paul on becoming an altogether new creation (*Gal* 6:14-18): 'Jean Valjean is nothing now. Another story must begin!'

Like Tolkein's mercy for the ring-bearer, so *Les Mis*' willingness to see good in a bishop is very welcome! But so is the thought that Catholic prayers, sacraments and convents might ac-

tually be good for people: that they can give them a new start, hope, vocation. While the world admires the law-abiding such as officer Javert, the wealth accumulators such as the Thénardiens, or the ideologues at the barricades, *Les Misérables*' heroes demonstrate that redemption is pure gift from God. And this adds insight to the redemption offered in *The Hobbit*. It is not just through loyal companionship in struggle, but by the pure, undeserved gift of life in Jesus Christ that we are saved.

Which may leave us with a nagging question: what about the outsiders? What about Tolkien's 'Smeagol' or Hugo's revolutionaries, driven by compulsions or ideology? Are they beyond the pale of redemption?

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A third cinematic treat released last summer was Ang Lee's film of Yann Martel's novel, *The Life of Pi*. It's a fantasy adventure about a boy who survives 227 days at sea after being shipwrecked in a life-boat with a Bengal tiger. President Obama, who read the book with his daughter, declared it an elegant proof both of the existence of God and of the power of story-telling.

Whatever we think of the answers in the book, the question of God is irresistible, it seems, even for the most powerful family on earth. And there are so many related questions, questions as-it-were packed into that one. In the movie young Pi Patel explores various religions in the search for answers. In the novel, when his teacher condemns all religion as darkness, Pi thinks 'Darkness is the last thing that religion is. Religion is light.' He wonders if the teacher is testing him, like when he says 'no mammal lays eggs' waiting for the boy to respond 'platypuses do'. In the film it's his father calls religion darkness and Pi responds by making the sign of the cross and declaring he wants to be baptized!

Perhaps Pope Francis had seen the film before choosing to call his first encyclical *Lumen fidei*. Pi Patel would certainly approve. The Holy Father's idea is that the light of the cross illuminates all subsequent history; and 'the light at the end of the tunnel' that is the



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CUP Resurrection draws us like moths to itself.

Questioning is useful, Pi concludes; we must even have our times in Gethsemane, like Christ anguished in prayer. 'But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.' Later recalling the days lost at sea, Pi says, 'It was hard, oh, it was hard. Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love—but sometimes it was so hard to love. Sometimes my heart was sinking so fast with anger, desolation and weariness, I was afraid it would sink to the very bottom of the Pacific.' So hard until, near drowning point, Pi surrenders to God in the pouring rain, with his arms outstretched like Christ on the cross. God's grace won by Christ was big enough for this Christian-Muslim-Hindu seeker. If by Abraham are all nations blessed, so we may hope that by the cross of Christ all humanity will one day be reunited and redeemed.

The film concludes by asking us which story is more satisfying: Pi's with God in it, or the secular world's story without? It's a rather post-modern way of framing the question of God. But as Pi concludes in the novel, God doesn't need us to defend Him: He'll be just fine whether we believe in Him or not. It's us who need to be shaped by the questions and answers. It's us who need Philosophy, Scripture, Theology. It's us who need the joy of homecoming, like Isaiah's Israel or Jesus' 72. Awe and gratitude, hope and love, open us up and faith in Jesus Christ redeems the Jean Valjeans and Bilbos and Pis in each of us. 'May I never boast—except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!'