

Remember you have been baptised

Isaiah 43. 1-7

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Christ, a dramatic event, as we heard in the gospel reading, where John immerses Jesus in the Jordan and then the heavens open and we hear the voice of God. Probably a bit more dramatic than our own baptisms around the font – unless of course you come from the Baptist tradition and experienced the thrill of full immersion baptism.

I'm reminded of the old story of a vicar and a Baptist minister discussing the relative merits of their two baptismal traditions with the Baptist minister not at all impressed with the splash and dash of the Anglican font.

"So tell me" says the vicar, would you consider the person to be baptised if they are immersed up to the waist?". "Certainly not" says the minister. "So how about up to the neck?" asks the vicar. "Of course not", says the minister. "The eyebrows?" "No, not the eyebrows" replies the minister. "So" says the vicar, "that proves my point – the only bit that matters is the bit at the top of the head!"

Now let me come back to baptism shortly, because I want to talk to you first about something very topical. We've come to that time of the year which is very exciting for all the film buffs out there because we've entered what is known as the awards season. This week saw the publication of the nominations firstly for the BAFTA's and then for the biggie – The Oscars. Now for those of you who haven't been following this too avidly, let me enlighten you as to what the hot films are for this year's awards.

For the BAFTA's, the nominations for best picture are; *Argo*, *Les Misérables*, *Life of Pi*, *Lincoln* and *Zero Dark Thirty*. For the Oscars it's pretty similar with the best picture nominations being; *Beast of the Southern Wild*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Amour*, *Argo*, *Life of Pi*, *Les Misérables*, *Lincoln*, *Silver Linings Playbook* and *Django Unchained*.

I'm not sure how many of those you've actually seen, if any. Some are a bit difficult because they haven't actually been released here yet but apparently, the hot money is on *Lincoln* to win, which is, as the name suggests a biopic of the famous American president of that name.

I confess I have seen none of them but I have read the book on which one of them is based and that is *Life of Pi* and that's the story that I wanted to talk about a little as it is very relevant for today and our reading from Isaiah because it is a film that very much focuses on fear

and faith, the major themes of our prophetic reading. So, for those of you who have neither seen the film, nor read the excellent book by Yann Martel, let me give you a quick synopsis.

It starts with two strangers sitting at a tiny table in a cramped and bustling coffee house, on Nehru Street, in southeastern India, on the Bay of Bengal, sipping coffee and conversing in the easy way that strangers can.

It's hot. It's humid. It's crowded with humanity. The aromatic coffee is delicious. Their cups are sipped empty.

At the table of two is an old man, a native of that region, and a young Canadian, a harried traveller and a writer, with nothing to write and a train to catch.

"I have a story that will make you believe in God," the old man promises.

A story.

Not an analysis. Not a report. Not a study. Not an essay.

But a story.

We don't reach faith through reason or research. We reach faith through stories and experiences. A well-told tale has the power to guide us to God, or into a deeper, more consequential connection with God.

The Canadian is suspicious. He wonders to himself, am I about to be evangelized by a Christian, or by a Muslim? Either way he motions for his bill, in order to make his escape.

While he awaits his waiter, he asks the old man: Does your story take place 2000 years ago in a remote corner of the Roman Empire?

No, replies the old man.

Does it take place in seventh-century Arabia?

No. No. It starts right here, and ends in your cold country.

The author is intrigued. He stays, orders two new coffees, then listens to the tale of a lifeboat, a tiger and a teenager named Pi.

Thus begins Yann Martel's fantastic and metaphorical book about faith, *Life of Pi: A Novel*. It's a story that explores faith by putting it to the test in the heart of catastrophe.

Martel began his project as an agnostic, but along the way he started to believe. He thought: What would it be like to have faith? What would it be like if a dreadful event happened, and to say that Jesus loves me nonetheless?

He decided he would approach religion not from a cynical, agnostic viewpoint, but from more of a neutral standpoint. He willingly suspended judgment, and began his four years of travel, research, reading and writing.

Then bit by bit, he fell for his subject. Bit by bit, he fell for God.

Pi is the sole human survivor of a cargo ship that sinks in the Pacific Ocean while transporting his family and animals from his family's zoo in India to Canada, where they hoped to start a new life

For 227 days, Pi drifts in a lifeboat with a 450-pound Bengal tiger that Pi rescues as the ship sinks. It's not a cute and cuddly story about a boy and his kitten. It's an engaging, dangerous and fascinating story about faith and survival.

As Pi adjusts to his grief and his terrifying situation — terror outside the boat, terror inside the boat — he plots to rid himself of the tiger. But in time, Pi discovers that it's the presence of the tiger that gives him the courage and determination he needs to survive his ordeal.

It's quite a metaphor — that we may need to live with what we fear, what we do not understand, what challenges us — in order to survive a greater trial. Faith and fear are partners in the boat together. Faith doesn't and shouldn't take away fear, instead it offers proof positive that God is the unseen third presence in that little boat. In Isaiah's words... "When you pass through the water's I'll be with you. When you walk through the fire you'll not be burned. For I am the Lord, your God. Since you are precious and honoured in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you and people in exchange for your life. Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

The Life of Pi is a metaphor for our lives. Our fear may not spring from something so obvious as having to share a small lifeboat with a man eating Bengal tiger, but we do share our lives with other fears. There are many terrifying and imprisoning experiences in our lives that are just as hard to escape from as Pi's tiger. Fear of the unknown, of grief, of cancer, of unemployment, of love or of loneliness. Do we, can we, will we still love God in the midst of dreadful calamity? Is there hope in despair?

There is a great line in the novel on the subject of fear and it's as follows. "I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life". Fear can paralyse us and take away the light of our lives and God knows this. That is why these words from Isaiah are so powerful and central to our faith. No matter what we fear, we can know that we have been saved, we have been redeemed. In the words of our hymn, "Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name, you are mine"

Now today is the celebration of the Baptism of Christ and we heard in our gospel reading about Christ's baptism in the Jordan by John. At the moment of Christ's baptism, the heaven's open and the voice of God is heard to say "You are my Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased"

Now our own baptism's may not have been so physically dramatic but spiritually we know from Isaiah that God's sentiments are just the same for us as they were for Jesus. In Isaiah's words, "I have called you by your name, you are mine". This is God's message to all of us as we are baptised and called in the family of the church by our names for the first time.

The great power of Isaiah's words are that he shouts out that great covenant between each of us and our God. God calls us by our names and we are His. We no longer need to fear because God's promise is to then be with us forever. It's an amazing reassurance but one that we may have a tendency to forget – particularly in times of stress and in times of fear.

It's reassuring to know that when this happens we are not alone and many great men and women of faith have wobbled and needed reminding of this amazing covenant from God. Martin Luther is said to have had a phrase above his desk to remind him every day of this covenant and it simply read, "Remember you have been baptised".

We would do well to do the same – to remember daily that we have been baptised and that in the waters of our baptism, not only are our sins washed away but a promise has been received. A promise from God that we are His and that God will look after what is His. A promise that our faith will overcome our fear if only we can do as Martin Luther did and "Remember you have been baptised"

Let us pray

Dear Lord. We thank you for the gift of our baptism and for your covenant with each and every one of us. We pray that we will have the strength in times of adversity to remember that we have been baptised and to place our trust in you. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen

Tom Crotty