

22 February 2015

On Monday afternoon, I slipped into the Nova cinema in Carlton to see the movie 'Wild'. It is based on a book by Cheryl Strayed who is played by Reece Wotherspoon. It tells the story of a young woman who sets out to walk over a thousand miles across some of America's harshest and most lonely territory on her own. Cheryl Strayed left her home and job and set out on this solo journey in order to come to terms with her divorce, the death of her mother and a few other challenges that life threw at her. Her pilgrimage is like a secular version of the Camino in Spain. As Cheryl Strayed made this long and dangerous journey, she had many flashbacks over her life, many of which were sad and quite confronting. There is a particularly moving scene where she walks through dense bushland carrying an enormous back-pack. You see her from the back simply walking and then falling to her knees and crying uncontrollably. She comes to terms with her past, her pain, her regrets and her mistakes.

While there are absolutely no religious connotations to the movie, to me it seemed like the biblical story of encounter and redemption. In the desert of her life, she comes to terms with the pain and sadness of the past and comes out a renewed person. She could have disappeared into a black hole of depression and more destructive behaviour, but Cheryl Strayed found new life, new hope and new meaning. In biblical terms, she found redemption and salvation. She found healing in her life.

On the first Sunday of Lent, having just commenced this season with Ash Wednesday, we have this image of Jesus driven into the desert by the Spirit to face the reality of temptation. Jesus himself is about to begin an extraordinary journey of redemption and salvation for himself and for the world. He will face many moments of darkness. He will be betrayed by his friends, he will be misunderstood, he will be tried in public and humiliated and he will die. On the cross, his project of proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom seems to come to a dramatic end.

Isn't it interesting how we begin Lent with the image of Jesus in the desert, how we begin Advent with the image of John the Baptist in the desert and how we walk into a cinema and see a young woman coming to terms with her life alone in the desert? The desert is a lonely place, a

confronting place, a terrifying place. But it is also the place where we pass from the darkness into the light of God's hope and salvation. A movie depicts what we already know from the bible; the good news that God does not leave us in the 'deserts' of life but leads us forth to hope, light and promise.

Just as the desert can be a place of destruction, so too can a flood destroy everything in its path. In today's first reading about Noah from the book of Genesis, God promises his people that never again will a flood bring destruction. God establishes a covenant with his people and places a rainbow in the sky as a sign of hope and life. Lent is our pilgrimage through the desert with Jesus, dying with him and rising to new life. It is the story and promise of God who does not abandon us to the darkness and desolation of the desert; it is the story of God who through the death of his Son leads us to the light and hope of the resurrection.

As we begin the season of Lent, we hear the Lord's call to embrace his cross and to follow him. Project Compassion is a great tradition of Lent of 'dying to self', of going without something in order to stand in solidarity with the poor and those around the world who struggle to find adequate food, adequate shelter, let alone a decent education and stable employment. Let us walk with Jesus the confronting journey of the desert and rise with him to a new and more abundant life.