

8 May 2016

The weekend before last, I watched the film *Life of Pi*, which is an adaptation of Yann Martel's novel of the same name. The title character Pi Patel escapes a sinking ship, and floats across the Pacific Ocean on a lifeboat. But he is not alone. He is accompanied by another survivor. A Bengal tiger with the unlikely name of Richard Parker.

During their long journey together, Pi and Richard Parker overcome many challenges. They come to depend on each other for survival, and they develop a kind of mutual understanding that enables Pi to avoid being eaten. But when they finally reach land, Richard Parker slopes off into the forest without looking back. Pi is distraught when he is rescued. His rescuers think he is having an understandable emotional reaction to his ordeal being finally over. But Pi is actually weeping because his companion has left him without saying goodbye.

As I watched this scene, I was reminded of our human need for things to be concluded in a tangible and orderly basis. We have rituals to mark the endings of lives, relationships, careers, and special events. Funerals, divorces, retirement parties, and closing ceremonies for the Olympic Games and the Rugby World Cup, are all declarations that something is over, and that it is time to move on.

Pi only wanted a glance of acknowledgement from Richard Parker before he disappeared into the forest. But he didn't even get that.

Last Thursday, the Church observed the Ascension. But unlike some of the other mysteries of our faith, such as the Resurrection, we don't seem to talk about the Ascension very much, and put it in the too-hard basket.

Jesus has achieved his earthly mission, and it is now time for others to carry on his work. But he has to make his departure obvious, so they will know they now have some responsibility for the fledgling Church, just like some animals abruptly evict their young from the nest when it is time. However, Jesus has a few more social skills than Richard Parker the tiger, and he has the decency to farewell his friends.

So where does Jesus go? He has to be seen to go somewhere that will make sense to those who are with him. Jesus' friends do not have the same understanding of the universe we have, and they believe heaven is a physical place somewhere up in the sky. So the only direction Jesus can be seen to go is up.

Today, some two thousand years later, it is generally accepted the universe is a sphere that is about 92 thousand billion billion kilometres across, which is really so vast that we cannot comprehend it. So where does Jesus really go?

He still goes to heaven. It's just not quite where his friends think it is. Throughout the Bible there are many distinctions between the spiritual realm and our physical existence, or in other words, between heaven and earth. The first verse in the Bible, which introduces the first creation story in Genesis, starts with the words:

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,"¹

And from the second to last chapter of Revelation, the final book in the Bible:

²¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.²

From the very beginning to the very end, the Bible clearly distinguishes between heaven and earth. In Celtic spirituality, there is a concept called a 'thin place', which is where the boundary between heaven and earth is extraordinarily thin, and heaven and earth can meet. To give some examples, heaven and earth met when God became fully human in Jesus the Christ, when the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us. They met when Jesus was baptised. As Mark 1:1-10 puts it:

¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'³

Heaven and earth met at other times during the life of Jesus, such as at his Transfiguration, and they met at his death and resurrection. And they meet again during his Ascension, when he leaves the world in bodily form.

We can only physically experience three dimensions. But several

years ago, I was amazed to read physicists have proposed the existence of up to 26 dimensions, most of which we cannot directly perceive. Now I am not to go as far as saying that heaven occupies any of these higher dimensions theorised in physics. Heaven is, after all beyond my experience and understanding. But I will say that if science can propose the existence of higher dimensions we cannot currently experience, then it is not unreasonable to say there is a spiritual realm that is separate from our physical existence.

You will all be familiar with the prayer Jesus taught us. I am going to read just the first part of it, as it is written in Matthew 6:9-10:

⁹ 'Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.⁴

We pray for the coming of God's kingdom, and that God's will be done here on earth as in heaven. The 'kingdom of heaven' we read of throughout St Matthew's Gospel is actually the realisation of God's reign of justice and peace here on earth. And that is where we come in.

When we give food to the hungry, refresh the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit people in prison, we are helping bring about God's kingdom.

When we show compassion to the last, the lost, and the least, when

we fulfil our obligations to care for God's creation, and we make an effort to deal with the suffering of children who live in poverty, we are helping bring about God's kingdom.

And it's not just about what we do for others. It's what we do for each other. We can disagree on matters that are really quite trivial, and these can drive a wedge between us. But by one Spirit we are baptised into one body. And when we put our differences aside, remember we are family, and treat each other as brothers and sisters, we are helping bring about God's kingdom.

One more thing. Jesus may physically leave the world during the Ascension. But he will be back. This is made clear in many places in the Newer Testament, including Revelation 22:12, which says:

¹² 'See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. ⁵

And I would like us all to ask ourselves this question: do we know how will we account for what we have - or have not - done to bring about the coming of God's kingdom?

Darryl Ward

8 May 2016

<http://theword.tk>

¹ Genesis 1:1 (NRSV)

² Revelation 21:1 (NRSV)

³ Mark 1:10-11 (NRSV)

⁴ Matthew 6:9-10 (NRSV)

⁵ Revelation 22:12 (NRSV)