

## St George's Anglican Church Malvern

### Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58.1-12    Psalm 51.1-18    2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10.    Matthew 6.1-6; 16-21.

I was all at sea on Monday morning. I went to see the Life of Pi in 3D. It's an amazing film. Not a story I knew. It's about a teenage boy from India, who is shipwrecked in the Pacific Ocean while travelling to a new life in Canada with the animals from his father's private zoo. Long story short: Pi – his name is short for Piscine French for swimming pool – is alone on a life boat with a Bengal tiger.

The tiger is called Richard Parker after the person who caught him and because the railway clerk confused that name with the Tiger's when sending the cage to the zoo. Pi has to learn to live with the tiger if he is to survive. The tiger is magnificent and dangerous. He is also inscrutable and a lot of the time he is hidden from view under a canvas tarpaulin. His presence is terrifying and yet having to deal with him, catch fish to feed him and collect fresh water for him, and eventually tame him, gives Pi a reason to live.

All his life even as a small boy, Pi has been drawn to the mystery at the heart of life. His father is a modern Indian with no time for religion. He only values rationality and science. Pi's mother says that's important but only deals with the outer world. She encourages Pi in his exploration of the religions he comes across – the Hinduism he was born into, the Christianity he found one day in a church and became attracted to Jesus, the suffering Son of God and the chanting of the Muslims which let him feel close to God.

So the Pi who is shipwrecked is attuned to the inner life, the spiritual life. He has already decided that there are many names for the reality we call God. He says names are easily confused – look at the way the tiger got the name Richard Parker. So he prays to Vishnu and to Jesus and acts of devotion to Allah – without, he says knowing the direction of Mecca.

Pi has discovered that faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust and an act of love - and that it is not easy.

Pi suffers – he has lost his family in the shipwreck; he pitches between despair and determination. His heart breaks when he finally reaches land and the tiger simply goes off into the jungle at the edge of the beach and doesn't even glance back. The love he felt for the tiger even as he feared him was not reciprocal.

In the end, the author is not trying to write anything but a cracking novel. I think he takes the line that all religions are the same and there are criticisms I can make of his 'theology' of suffering – mainly that it seems pointless except as a phenomenon of human life, there is no call for justice for those who are wronged by others and no recompense for those who suffer.

But here is something else that keeps coming back to me. Pi knows that without the tiger he would lose a sense of purpose, something to be striving for, fall into despair and die. Yet, the tiger threatens Pi's life at every moment.

The tiger is somehow both necessary and potentially fatal. The author of the story doesn't suggest these next thoughts – this is me trying to make sense of the reality that our mortality and our capacity to choose what harms us and the creation is like the tiger in Pi's life.

The scriptures have several terms for what we call 'sin'. One means missing the mark, missing the goal, failing to find the right path. A person can be trying, but fail through ignorance, or an error of understanding or judgement, or just plain incompetence. Another word means the guilt that comes from wilful wrongdoing in defiance of God's command; and it also implies the punishment that is a consequence of a bad choice. So, the punishment is not God's anger but God allowing us to live with our choices – like the prodigal son. A third term is about the deliberate transgression against another person or people; we might call it a criminal act or a violation of a people's human rights. So, the scriptures know that sin is both deliberate, and also (more often) born of ignorance or an inability to do better. It is basic to human experience and it is universal in its reach. As the scriptures tell the human story, sin is there in our behaviour right from the beginning. Its potential was created along with the first people in the perfect world. Since sin breaks the human relationship with God, in the Hebrew Scriptures there are ritual ways to restore that relationship through sacrificial worship in the Temple.

In the Christian scriptures sin is understood as both falling short and rebelling against God's ways. It is Paul, the converted rabbi who first sets out how the death and resurrection of Jesus undoes the grip of sin and death into which 'the Adam's' fault delivered humanity. That's why he calls Jesus 'the new Adam.'

St Augustine calls sin a happy fault – but only because it shows us how merciful and kind God is. "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!" We sing it on Easter morning in the Exultet. Theologians wonder if God has not allowed evil so that a greater good might become known to us which we would not otherwise experience.

So, perhaps our capacity to sin – consciously and unconsciously (thank you Dr Freud) – is the tiger in the life boat with us. We can pretend the tiger is not there – and some Christians try that; they call it sinless perfection. It's an illusion. Or we can learn to look the tiger in the eye, know our fear of the tiger's power and danger and learn how to tame the tiger, sometimes even noticing that without the struggle we would remain childish, lacking in the maturity that only comes from the kind of honesty and integrity needed to live with the tiger. That's the robust, life giving way of the mainstream Christian tradition – the desert mothers and fathers lived it; the mystics in every age live in all sorts of situations and now it is our turn and this Lent is our

invitation to engage with God who is just waiting – longing for us to acknowledge the tiger and see beyond to the restoration of our humanity in Jesus who has already tamed the beast that still will roar at us for a while yet, though we now have nothing to fear.