

Going to the movies is a great thing to do. You get to sit in the dark. Cuddle up close to someone you love. Look at images on a huge screen in living colour with emotive and suspenseful sound effects. Immerse yourself in a story that takes you out of yourself, your experience, your circumstances for at least 90 minutes or so.

Going to the movies is a great thing to do, and many years ago I went to a seminar which involved storytelling and movie making. The one thing I remember from that seminar was a comparison that was given to us in the telling of the story of Romeo and Juliet.

I mean, it's the same words, the same story, the same characters and the same outcome ... but man can you change the whole nature of the experience by its setting and pace. The first version we watched was the director Castenelli from 1954. It was set in what you might imagine fair Verona to look like, the characters wore very clean but medieval garb and it was all conducted in what seemed like an endless swoon.

The second was Baz Luhrmann's version from 1997, set in downtown LA, filled with guns, helicopters, cars, shootings and gangs. One to be fair was like watching paint dry ... the other like observing the mayhem on Capitol Hill, after the American election. Unstoppable.

I learnt at that seminar that pace and setting in movies and storytelling was vitally important.

A man goes into the desert. Setting. He is baptised, arising from the water, the heavens are torn open and the Holy Spirit falls on him. The tearing, the tenor of the narrative suggests this descent is fast, forceful and compelling. Pace.

The heavens are rent again and God speaks.

The Spirit immediately drives the man into the wilderness. Into the abode of Satan and the habitat of wild animals. Here he is properly put to the test. It is a physical and spiritual battle. The man contends with the forces of evil and the wild animals. It is so desperate that the angels sustain him.

John is arrested, and the man comes..." proclaiming the good news of God."

Saying, "the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

This is not conducted as an endless swoon. This is not considered, civilised, cultured or refined. This is forcibly, overwhelmingly urgent.

This is a demonstration of Spirit and power. Utterly compelling, utterly unstoppable.

It is a confrontation of the power that dominates this world in the Satan, with the power of God, in Jesus the Christ. Worthy of the big screen movie treatment it will one day get.

It all centres here. The setting and the pace make the impact.

Hear the language.

Torn open. Descending like a dove. Voice from heaven. Immediately drove him. Wilderness. Tempted by Satan. Wild beasts. Angels. Arrested. Proclaiming. Repent and believe.

This is forceful, powerful, compelling.

This is like being grabbed and shaken.

This is declaration. A declaration that, in all of this world that is,

God in Christ, in the power of the Spirit... is more.

More than Satan, demons, spirits, sickness. More than religious form, nature, family. More than tradition, culture. More than human understanding and foolishness. More than political structures and agendas. More than material desires and fear. More than established ideas, physical images, archetypes and myth. More than rejection, betrayal, agony and even death. More than the closed fabric of time.

In these six verses the gospel of Mark is established... and the one who comes proclaiming, the one proclaimed, is, in the power of the Spirit, utterly unstoppable.

This is the story Mark wants to tell, the story he wants us to hear, the story clothed by setting and highlighted by pace ...

It is this robust, tested, unstoppable God in Christ, in the power of the Spirit ...

that the writer of Mark wants us to see... and realise... lives in us ... empowers us ... drives us ... tests us.....

and makes us ...

utterly unstoppable too...

as we begin this Lenten season of 2021

Going to the movies is a great thing to do.

Thanks be to God.