

2020 7TH SUNDAY

A movie which really touched my heart was 'The Railway Man'. It is a movie which unflinchingly examines the damage done to a person's spirit when that person is consumed by hatred and seeks revenge.

Eric Lomax, played by Colin Firth, was an English soldier captured at the Fall of Singapore and made to work constructing the Death Railway whereby the Japanese occupying forces strove to link Burma and Thailand. Lomax built a tiny radio from scraps he found around the Camp and for a few weeks was able to keep the spirit of his fellow prisoners up with news from the outside. However he was caught and for many months underwent brutal torture from a Japanese officer called Nagase.

Lomax survived the war and returned to England. Eventually he regained weight and looked perfectly normal; but within his spirit he was far from normal. He seethed with hatred for Nagase. He was afflicted with horrendous nightmares and was an emotional cripple; unable to respond with any sort of sensitivity to Patti, his wife, who was played by Nicole Kidman. He was habitually angry, self-centred and bad-tempered. He was like a human pressure-cooker.

Eventually Patti, a wonderfully compassionate woman, finally persuaded him to tell the story of the abuse he had suffered. Patti did some research and discovered that Nagase, her husband's tormentor, was still alive. So she set to organise a meeting between her husband and Nagase. She knew there had to be a resolution. Her husband was constantly talking about suicide. He had to face his demons and she sensed that time was short.

Nagase, in turn, was filled with a deep sense of guilt and remorse for the crimes he had committed. He had dedicated his life to helping the authorities identify the graves of the victims of the Death Railway.

The meeting between Lomax and Nagase was gripping. Unknown to Patti, Lomax took a knife with him to the meeting intending to slit Nagase's throat. But when he had Nagase at his mercy, Patti's voice echoed in his mind: "At some time the hating has to stop." And he threw the knife away.

In the credits we were told that Lomax and Nagase subsequently visited each other several times and built a deep friendship. Lomax and Patti both died in their 90's- a happy and fulfilled couple. And there were no more nightmares, no more uncontrollable anger, no more thoughts of suicide.

The story has everything to do with today's Gospel. Speaking as the New King Solomon- the Man of Authority and Wisdom- Jesus says: "In the Mosaic Law it says that you must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be sons and daughters of your Father in heaven. You must be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Hatred is a very dangerous thing and can destroy us. It creates a legacy of poison. It also gives the person we hate a power over us, robbing us of our peace of mind and our capacity to love. It is a power they most certainly do not deserve.

Lomax could have taken revenge and slit Nagese's throat. But revenge would have done little to lift his darkness of spirit. It would simply have plummeted Lomax into an even deeper level of darkness.

Consider today's 2nd Reading: "The Spirit of God lives among you. Each one of you is God's temple. You are sacred." No matter the terrible crimes Nagese had committed, Nagese's life was sacred and Lomax did not have the right to violate it.

How wise are the words of the Lord: "You have learnt how it was said: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

It is desperately hard to love our enemies. Something deep and primeval within us demands revenge on people who trample over us. It is natural to hope that they will spend an eternity in hell. To love them does not mean that we must like them. But it does mean that we pray asking God to bring them to repentance. This marks us out as being Christians.

Jesus, when ambushed in the Garden of Gethsemane, commanded Peter to put his sword aside. He accepted the kiss of Judas and did not strike him back. Throughout His torments, He made no threats to Herod, Pilate or Caiaphas. He did not curse the sadistic soldiers. He stayed quiet and with His final breath, He forgave His tormenters.

And the Father vindicated Him. What seemed like defeat became victory. Jesus was raised from the dead and was glorified as King of the Universe.

In faith we believe that when we entrust the insults done to us to our Redeemer- we too will be vindicated. We will attain serenity of heart.

This was something Patti Lomax knew. It was something Eric Lomax had to learn. But learn it he did- as will all people who take the words of Jesus literally and strive to forgive their enemies.

