



Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban - film

We have much to thank Alfonso Cuarón for in his interpretation of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. The third film in the series is quite different in tone, but more than that, it is visually stunning and challenging.

The star of this film is not the three children, but the natural world itself, God's own creation, and it requires us to go back to creation theology and be challenged to think about what we teach about the natural world in which we live.

The film has been described as 'darker' than the others. In fact it is literally darker, the cinematography is washed in dark shades, shadows closing in and around Harry, Ron and Hermione. It is also 'colder', the Dementors don't just render humans cheerless, but lock the natural world in the ice of winter, like Narnia under the witch's spell. A fantastic shot of a foxglove in full flower becoming frosted and then frozen as a Dementor passes makes the point forcibly, - evil affects nature too.

We know all about the primordial distinction between dark and light and about the One who brings light into the world. We see this happen on both levels. At the beginning, Harry is in a dark room learning how to bring light into dark places, he rushes out into the eerie dark and stops under a sputtering light that goes out. Later we see him walking the dark places of Hogwarts illuminating things which don't want to be seen. Under Professor Lupin's tutelage, he learns to conjure the Patronus which emerges as a brilliant shield of white light pushing back the darkness and the Dementors. With this comes learning, - the light which saves Sirius, his own light hovering above his lips and about to be extinguished, is not that of some dead person come to save the day, but one who is alive. We are filled with the light of Christ.

Cuarón also puts the 'magic' of the witches and wizards up against the power and force of nature. We see the children in huge vistas and landscapes, dwarfed by the majesty of creation. The enchanted ceiling in the great hall under which the children sleep shows not the prevailing weather but the creation and death of stars in the brilliant galaxies of God's universe. Indeed God's challenge to Job about the creation of the mountains, the stars and the weather seems to underlie the visual impact of a film in which the humans appear small and their concerns petty. Their spells are no match for storm and wind. Harry's Quidditch match is overtaken by rain and lightning, cloud and wind. The whomping willow 'decides' the seasons, is full of its own extraordinary power. If it wants to, it can pick up the children and toss them aside. Human beings are powerless in the face of such nature. The human-made scarecrow in the pumpkin patch is ignored by the crows who are not remotely scared at all and one of which sits on top of the Minister for Magic's head. In Lupin's study, an orrery reminds us again of the greater creation in which we live and move.

So Cuarón brings into remarkable focus the human relationship with the natural world. What is it for and how should we behave towards it? There is a wonderful scene where Harry and Hermione find a tiny snail in the Pumpkin Patch whose whorls recall the spiral staircase up to the Divination Room, - humans can only imitate the perfection and beauty of nature. Our inability to tame the wildness of nature and our subsequent attempt to subdue it is also questioned and brought out. Buckbeak should be treated with respect, but is sentenced to death. The werewolf, howling in its agony, is shunned and persecuted. So will it take humans to become animals to reach that proper sympathy and





understanding with nature which God intended? Is struggling with his animal nature what makes Lupin such a kind and sensitive teacher?

Through this means Cuarón does something very remarkable about showing us the transition from the idealised childhood world to the more difficult and ambiguous world of adolescence and eventual adulthood. At the beginning the bluebird of happiness flits carelessly across the sunlit grounds only to be shredded by the whomping willow. The simple questions of good and evil are gone. Interestingly, the film points us to the growth and change of adolescence – there is more emphasis both on physical change and physical contact. The outrageous swelling of Aunt Marge is contrasted with Harry's teenage temper- he does not know what to do with growing up. Hands are important - not just the obvious things like Hermione holding Ron's hand, but hands generally. Hands are everywhere: Ron's hand shape on the icy window, the Dementor's scaly hand, the outstretched hand of Dumbledore and others to ward or to save. Hermione and Harry hold hands as a symbol of their unity and solidarity. Sirius and Lupin embrace. Harry, Ron and Hermione hold each other as Buckbeak is executed. This emphasis on physical bodies touching, reaching out to each other and forming relationships complements the film's enquiry into who the children are going to become. Harry is told how much he is like his parents, but, having believed his father saved his life, realises that he can no longer look to the adult world for salvation. Decision, responsibility and *faith* become his motivator. Dumbledore empowers this.

So another great theme in this film is Time. We were all once children. Children grow up. We have been given the gift of time by God. How shall we use this time? Perhaps we should all have a great pendulum in our homes swinging back and forth to remind us to use time wisely, for death will be the end of this gift of human earthly life. The executioner's axe which kills Buckbeak is as the scythe of Old Father Time. But Dumbledore gives Harry and Hermione the gift back. Hermione's time turner means that even in this hopeless case, miracles can happen – the innocent can be saved, the dead made alive. This is not a mere rewriting of history, but a way of making more of time – for it is already enmeshed into the present with Dumbledore's complicity, getting the executioner and the Minister for Magic to look the other way. How may we best and judiciously use *our* time?

It is Dumbledore too who says something that should give us all pause for thought. "A child's voice, however honest and true, is meaningless to those who have forgotten how to listen." We should enjoy this film and allow the children to teach us how to remember. Perhaps then we will listen.

