

Is Life Beautiful?

I tend to agree with Alfred Hitchcock that *'the length of a film should be directly related to the endurance of the human bladder'*. However, one film that had a profound effect on me, and one that arguably everyone should watch at some point in their life, is Schindler's List, the Spielberg film of 1993 that focussed on the unspeakable suffering at Auschwitz. Four years later, another film surfaced, an Italian film, that also examined the suffering of the concentration camps, but this was an unusual film as it was funny in parts and the critics were ready with their pens to slate it. But the film 'Life is beautiful' went on to win three Oscars and the critics were wrong to doubt it.

The first line of the film, spoken by the narrator, tells us: *'This is a simple story but not an easy one to tell.'* The story is in two halves. The first is where we meet Guido, a Jewish bookshop owner, funny, spontaneous, loving. He falls in love with Dora, a Catholic woman engaged to an unpleasant Fascist and, with touching relentless comic moments, Guido woos her and eventually carries her off on a rainy night out of her restricting, class-ridden, unhappy life on his uncle's horse, which has been painted green by anti-Jewish thugs. In the midst of the threatening clouds of fascism, they celebrate together their pleasure in simple things: eggs, a bike, a kiss. They marry and have a little son Joshua, and to watch the three of them is an absolute joy. Guido makes everything fun. He loves Joshua with a reckless, spontaneous, deep love, and his wife with the same, and they all live as friends as well as family. It is, indeed, beautiful.

On Joshua's fourth birthday, though, Dora returns home to find that the Nazis have taken Guido and her son away to the train bound for the concentration camp. She races there and, although not a Jew, insists that the train is stopped so that she can get on it too. Although she is not in the same carriage, she is going with them. She cannot, will not, let them go on this journey without her.

At the camp, to survive the horror, Guido tells the little Joshua that they have entered a big game with lots of tests and that they have to score 1,000 points to win a brand-new real tank, by not complaining about being hungry, by hiding at certain points and doing what the game leaders in uniforms tell them to do. He pretends each day that he is going out to play hopscotch and 'ring a rosy' with the other men, while really he is burdened with carrying iron anvils that are slowly crushing his body. Guido hides the brutality by his fatherly fun. And when he stands to attention in the rain, shouted at and imprisoned by

walls and dogs, he continues to smile for the sake of his son, just as he rescued Joshua's mum in the rain that day on a green horse.

Eventually the war looks as if it is ending and the soldiers are keen to cover up their evil deeds and get rid of the human evidence. There is panic and movement. Guido puts Joshua in a small post-box shaped box and tells him not to come out until everyone has gone because they are all looking for him because he is winning the game and, if they find him, he loses. Meanwhile, in all the confusion, Guido puts a scarf over his head and runs off to look for his wife in the women's section of the camp. He is discovered by a searchlight, pinned on a wall. He is taken away and marched past the cupboard where his son is. They see one another through the post-box hole and Guido, true to the fun, to the game, to his love, winks and marches like a toy soldier to reassure his son that all is well and to make him smile one last time. We hear the bullets a few moments later.

Joshua is later rescued by US troops – in a brand-new tank. His dad was right, here is his prize! As he rides on the tank he sees his mother and calls out. They hug and hug, thin and tired, and Joshua shouts out: *'We won Mama, we won! Here's the tank!'* Joshua's voice then comes in, years later, as the film ends: *'This was the sacrifice my father made for me,' he says, 'it was his gift.'*

Life is Beautiful has many lessons to enjoy in it, not least in the first half of watching a simple family survive in the midst of a prejudiced society, where sinister forces are at work, but where they so clearly prove that happiness is not having what you want, but wanting what you have. This is a film about life's possibilities, even in horror. It asks us what it might mean to lay aside yourself in order to find it.

I read a book recently which said that we should try and set aside an hour every day, a day every week and a week every year to stop striving: striving to have more and prove more. Instead, we should stop in these times and see the gift and good we already have. Such Sabbath times, he said, keep us human.

There are also Christ figures in this film. Dora, though not a Jew, joins those on the way to their suffering. Her love cannot be separated from those who make up her life. She reflects God. Guido, similarly, works with contagious love and affection in the midst of evil to save the buoyancy of the human soul and spirit, to prove that hope and courage and humour and love are mightier than bullets and pain, mightier than a cross, reflecting the words from our reading today

from Paul's letter to the Romans: *'Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to celebrate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'* In Guido's heart, goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death. He does anything he can to protect and keep hope alive in his child. He reflects God. Joshua, which of course is the same name as Jesus, believes his father no matter what, and receives life because of it: *'This was the sacrifice my father made for me. It was his gift.'*

And through Jesus' sacrifice, St Paul is able to say in his letter to the Corinthians:

'Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

On the day when we remember the sacrifice of many who gave their lives in order that we, today, can live in safety and in peace, what should be our response? Again, scripture gives us the answer:

'Therefore, my dear friends, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.'

And what is the work of the Lord? On this day of Remembrance, to strive for all that makes for peace.

Amen.