

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (Jan. 26, 2014)

For those interested in **the movies**, this tends to be an especially interesting time of the year. It is the time when the annual awards, including the Oscars, are handed out for the best in various categories including film, director, actors and a host of other aspects involved in the movie making process.

I have seen several of the films nominated for the Oscar for best movie of the year. Most of them have something important to say about life and relationships and about the way we treat one another. The most sober of them from this point of view is **“12 Years a Slave.”** It is based on the autobiography of a free, mid nineteenth-century African American who was kidnapped and sold into slavery. The brutality and inhumanity of certain individuals and situations in the film are not only difficult to watch, but make one all but despair at the depths to which we, as human beings, can descend in our treatment of one another.

A more upbeat film is **“Nebraska.”** In black and white and set in rural contemporary America, it tells the story of an elderly man who is taken in by one of those “You have won a million dollar” scams and sets out on foot, a number of times, from his home in Montana for Lincoln, Nebraska to claim his winnings. His dogged pursuit of his supposed good fortune seems to reflect a deep need in him

for a goal or purpose in his life. Although everyone tries to persuade him of the foolishness and futility of what he is doing, he remains adamant. Finally his younger son agrees to drive him.

Although the movie is full of comical incidents as well as of insights into how the very thought of easy money can corrupt people, its climax is quite touching. At one point the son asks his father what at his age he would do with the money he might get; his answer is simple: buy a pick-up truck.

When the two of them arrive at their goal, they learn, not surprisingly, that the old man has won nothing beyond a baseball cap. To compensate for his father's disappointment, the son trades in his car, adds cash and **buys the truck** his father has been dreaming of. It gives the man a chance to face and stare down relatives and others who had mocked him for his naiveté.

I saw the film a day or two before our celebration of the feast of the Holy Family. The first reading that day was from the **book of Sirach**. Among other things it said: "My child, help your father in his old age; do not grieve him as long as he lives. Even if his mind fails, be patient with him. Kindness to your father will never be forgotten." The relationship of the son to the father in the movie exemplifies in a powerful way what the biblical text is urging.

The other movie I would like to mention is “**Philomena.**” It is beautifully acted, and even while it touches on complex and delicate issues, it is, in the end both satisfying and uplifting.

It is based on an account of the actual experience of an Irish woman who at the time of the film is probably in her late 60s. She is played by the superb **Judy Dench**. As a teenager, the woman became pregnant outside of marriage and was sent to a home for young women in her situation. In the Ireland of the time, girls like her were called Magdalene girls. The portrayal of some of the nuns involved in running the home is anything but edifying. With obvious exceptions, they did not manifest the kind of compassion and mercy, the simple humanity, that the world finds so attractive in a person like Pope Francis. Most distressing for the young Philomena was that her child was given up for adoption to what later is revealed to be an American family.

Having never said anything to anyone about her past, she now tells her grown daughter of her son. Tormented by the thought of what might have become of him, she sets out with a writer on a journey in search of him. The journey is sometimes humorous, sometimes dramatic, sometimes tragic. At the

end of it, Philomena discovers that her son has died, but before doing so, he had returned to Ireland in an unsuccessful attempt to find her.

A final dramatic confrontation takes place involving an elderly nun who had been at the convent when Philomena gave birth and who could have given her name to her son when he came looking for her but did not. She refused, she says, because the girls in the home were all sinners and deserved whatever suffering and difficulties they encountered. The poor woman had become self-righteous and judgmental, cruel and cold, the absolute antithesis of what the gospel is all about. “Love one another as I have loved you,” Jesus says in one place; in another he affirms that the whole of biblical teaching can be summed up in the single commandment “love your neighbour as yourself.”

While the nun’s outburst outrages the journalist, Philomena’s response is very different. **“I forgive you,”** she says. Given all that happened, nothing could have been more surprising or moving. It is the response called for by the gospel.

Whether we turn to fiction or the news, to movies or other art forms, we can find all around us things that can **make us think**, think about what it is to be human, about the nature of good and evil, about what it means, in a culture like ours, to try **to live the values of the Gospel**.