

## Two Recent Movies: *Into the Wild*, *Bella*

The encounter between Jesus and the rich young man came to mind as I watched *Into the Wild*. It would surprise me if the director, Sean Penn, intended it, but the movie can be read as an intriguing variation on the incident. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus tells the virtuous, somewhat pompous, youth that one thing *is* lacking: "Go, sell what you have, give to the poor, and come, follow me." When the young man went away sad, Jesus commented, "It will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." The film reverses the Gospel story, in that the hero, Christopher McCandless (Emile Hirsch), begins by giving away or destroying his possessions and then for the rest of the film tries to discover why he has done so. As a parable for today, *Into the Wild* ends with the hero's never having found a full answer to his quest; he starved to death in Alaska, in 1992, for the story is based on fact. *En route* to this melancholy end, McCandless encounters a number of people, all of whom, like himself, are out of the mainstream of American life: aging hippies, a farmer in South Dakota who has run afoul of the law, a free-spirited couple from Denmark, a young girl, an old, reclusive widower. Not one them can hold the youth, although they all have something to offer him, and he to them.

The plot device of the movie is the familiar, every-effective one of a journey which represents an interior change: Homer's Ulysses seeking his home; Cervantes' Don Quixote, adventure; and Bunyan's Christian, the Celestial City. At the beginning of his quest, McCandless does not know his goal, but he does know that nothing in his immediate surroundings can satisfy him. Like Christian, Christopher begins by fleeing the City of Destruction. "Society is corrupt!" he chants; academic success is empty, his family a hindrance. All he wants is freedom which he hopes ultimately to find in the Alaskan wilderness. And so his tiny library consists of Tolstoy, Jack London, and Thoreau: "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth." Unfortunately Chesterton's *Heretics* was not included. McCandless would have profited from the chapter "On Sandals and Simplicity":

One great complaint, I think, must stand against the modern upholders of the simple life—the simple life in all its varied form, from vegetarianism to the honourable consistency of the Doukhobors. This complaint against them stands, that they would make us simple in the unimportant things, but complex in the important things. They would make us simple in the things that do not matter—that is, in diet, in costume, in etiquette, in economic system. But they would make us complex in the things that do matter—in philosophy, in loyalty, in spiritual acceptance, and spiritual rejection. . . . The only kind of simplicity worth preserving is the simplicity of the heart, the simplicity which accepts and enjoys.

Let me therefore call attention to the irony that this paean to the simple life, to burning one's money and destroying one's credit cards, was made with a technical complexity that required literally hundreds of workers and millions of dollars. And then we enter, the moviegoers, with our tubs of popcorn and gallons of pop to sit in cushioned comfort as we watch a young man die of starvation in the wilderness because of his contempt for, among other things, movie theaters.

Like the rich young man, McCandless is virtuous: honest, hard working, chaste, kind. He also anticipates the call of Jesus in other ways. He has nowhere to lay his head, and he defies even as he outwits the Pharisees of our day, bureaucrats who, e.g., require a permit to canoe down the Colorado River or identification to re-enter the States from Mexico. But the encounter with the old man is, I think, the most significant. He and Christopher climb a hill, which turns out to be at once the site of the Sermon on the Mount and of the Transfiguration. The old man, in a charming, highly charged moment presents Christopher with the two things he needs: someone to love and the Bread of Life. He does the first by offering to adopt Christopher and the second when he refuses Christopher's offer to join in the quest because he has to be back for 8 o'clock Mass. In other words, McCandless should join him.

Christopher was happy in his Alaskan isolation until at length, as he tried to return, he discovered that he was "trapped in the wild." The frozen river he had crossed to his camp site had become an impassible torrent in the spring thaw and run-off. The symbolism that is evident elsewhere in the film invites the viewer to invest these events with religious significance. A river that no one can cross on his own—the River Jordan—greeted the pilgrim Christian at the end of his journey. Like McCandless, he was frightened and alone, but the virtue of hope—personified as Hopeful in the allegory—succored him, and so he finally entered the Celestial City. McCandless, apparently not a Christian, is unable to cross. And so he starved to death. What he really needed was to be fed with the Bread of Life, for which he had been prepared by a sort of baptism. That occurred earlier in what is identified as "Chapter 1: My Own Birth." In it, Christopher stands beside the ocean, hesitating to enter because he is afraid of water, as well he might be, given what baptism can mean. Nevertheless, he does go in, is reborn, and begins a new life with a new name, Alexander Supertramp. His progress is chronicled in subsequent "chapters" labelled adolescence, manhood, family, and finally wisdom. The wisdom is highlighted by a change in his reading during his last weeks: *Doctor Zhivago*. The contrived simplicity of Tolstoy, the heroics of Jack London, the naturalism of Thoreau give way to the overpowering love of *Zhivago* for Lara. One should not, one cannot live alone. And so McCandless did achieve a certain wisdom at the end: "Happiness is only real when it is shared," and in his hallucinating final hours he was able to imagine a joyous reconciliation with his parents. His final message was left on a piece of cardboard: "I have had a happy life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless all!"

The biblical inspiration for *Bella* is the parable of the prodigal son, but cleverly the story takes up after the son has been welcomed home. Jose (Eduardo Verástegui) ends up working as a chef in the restaurant of the older brother, Manny (Mannie Perez), who is ruthless and driven like the elder son in the parable. *Bella* is as overtly religious as *Into the Wild* is not. In one scene—a nightmarish imaginary visit to an abortuary—Jose is saying his rosary; and in the family home there is a large picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Despite this difference, the heroes share an independence that has its origin in the biblical call to find one's life in losing it. Like McCandless, Jose has turned his back on "success," in this case as a star athlete. Also, one can be as isolated in New York as in Alaska, but unlike McCandless Jose is enabled to return to life through his encounter with one of the waitresses, Nina (Tammy Blanchard). She's pregnant and unhappy about it. After she is fired by Manny, Jose follows her and in the course of a day comes to grips

with his own history even as he helps Nina accept her situation. Less dramatically than *Into the Wild*, water plays an important part in *Bella*; Jose and Nina journey to the ocean shore where in a long conversation, they solidify the understanding they have come to about themselves. The film actually opens on the same beach in a scene that anticipates the final moments of the story, some years later, when the play of the child and Jose, later joined by Nina, brings the story to a satisfying conclusion.

In the course of their journey to the water, the “prodigal son” and the “woman taken in adultery” are welcomed home by Jose’s parents, mother and father, and the joyful feast that follows—in the absence of Manny—is the occasion for each in his own way to move beyond the past into the present and to welcome the future. The meal is a delightful moment in the movie, the youngest son and his girl friend providing relief from the sober conversations between Jose and Nina that otherwise dominate the film. Another reconciliation takes place at a meal, the breakfast that Jose prepares and shares with Manny back in the restaurant.

*Bella* is the first film produced by a new company, Metanoia. The story behind the making of the movie would make a good second feature. The directors, the producers, and the leading actor are Catholics who are committed to their faith and eager to make films that affirm life, eschewing sensational violence and sex. Verástegui, in particular, came back to the practice of his faith with renewed vigour and like his colleagues wanted to make films that showed Latino men as more than amorous or idiotic, and Latino culture as an enrichment rather than a threat to America. *Bella* is a promising first step, but its appeal may not be broadly based enough to ensure financial success. Although in 2007 it won the People's Choice Award at the Toronto Film Festival, many viewers would have been from pro-life and Catholic organizations. The presence of Verástegui himself could ensure a big box office if word gets out to the Latino community. He was once an extremely popular entertainer in Central and South America, a heart throb for every Spanish-speaking woman from the Arctic circle to Chile, comparable to Brad Pitt in America—although, unlike Pitt, he’s actually handsome. But ladies, be warned. In this film he hides his good looks behind a bushy beard and a chef’s outfit.