

## AVATAR & Great Lent

Do you know what an “avatar” is? Just ask your children and they will tell you an avatar is an object which represents you in a video game. When my children invited me to play “Wii” with them, I created my own avatar, “Padre” who was an animated caricature of me. The advanced 3-D technology used in the movie Avatar, allows viewers to experience another world in a powerful way. Joseph Campbell who wrote *The Power of Myth* said, “People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That's what it's all finally about, and that's what these clues (myths) help us to find within ourselves.” The presence of the Avatar myth (as portrayed in the movie) says that weak and broken humanity has the potential to rise above our limitations and become transfigured into a higher being – one that is God-like. The issue is that the inner-self knows this to be true but we do not know how to experience it or to live in it. “God became man so that man might become a god” says, St. Athanasius. And Jesus taught, “I am the bread of life; the one who cometh to Me in no wise shall hunger; and the one who believes in Me in no wise shall thirst at any time (Jn. 6:35).” To connect with these saving truths, Great Lent leads us into these waters of life.

Most often movies just entertain, but some address inner spiritual questions. Neglecting one’s spiritual life leaves us feeling limited, confounded, mystified, terrified and bewildered by our world. So we choose to deal with life’s problems by seeing a doctor, becoming obsessed with food, taking pills, watching sports, going shopping, becoming workaholics or seeing movies. The Church Fathers in their wisdom have laid aside a ten week period from four weeks prior to Great Lent until Pentecost (50 days later) as a call to find and live in the joy of Resurrection (Bishop Kallistos Ware). Finding peace with Christ and ourselves requires an extended, persistent, life-long effort. This is why every year we need to re-enter the school of repentance called Great Lent (Fr. Schmemmann). Each year entering into this spiritual arena we draw deeper into the discovery of how spiritually disabled we have become and how through repentance we can arise from the flames, re-born and transformed. “Therefore we learn from the Lord this sublime doctrine that the only truly and solidly existing thing is our zeal for virtue (Gregory of Nyssa) .” Our role is not to invent another story but to enter into the story which is Christ and this requires learning the mind of Christ as experienced through the Church.

Through the creation of an Avatar, a disabled soldier is allowed to move, run, jump and fly in a world that exists alongside the real world. The Na’vi people, have a life-giving connection that exists between them and creation around them. A rite of passage into maturity includes the taming of a particular wild beast that would become a life-long companion and a source of transportation. The flying beast that would try to kill you is the one destined for you to tame and connect with. Christian parallels are definitely

present and through understanding how the mind of Christ is expressed in the Church, we come to understand how sin and repentance work.

All who sin become immobilized, disabled and earth bound. Every sin is a voluntary act of separating ourselves from God's grace and clinging to the world. In the absence of His grace, we invent counterfeit spiritual experiences that cannot replace what we lost. The adrenaline rush of intense action movies or the addicting nature of video gaming or gambling is present because of the altered state of consciousness that is manipulated through sounds, sights and the hope of an intangible reward. Perhaps there is a hidden reason why we find so enjoyable various forms of entertainment from amusement parks to movies... we are trying to quench an inner thirst for a connection. "As for those who waste their lives in absurd lusts, even if their soul should constantly be occupied with licentiousness, yet it will not always be able to enjoy it. For satiety stops the greed of the glutton and the drinker's pleasure is quenched at the same time as his thirst. These all require a certain interval of time to rekindle the desire for the delights, which enjoyment carried to satiety has caused to flag (Gregory of Nyssa)." When a spiritual life is not nurtured through a relationship with Christ, nothing is right. "Nobody can dispense with inner prayer. We cannot live spiritually unless we raise ourselves in prayer to God...If prayer is right, everything is right (Theophan the Recluse, Art of Prayer)." Through faith we begin to find movement and mobility and begin to realize another level of life is possible through Christ Who has come to lift us up. So we seek to connect with God through prayer and fasting and as we die to selfish desires our sensibilities become purified and we return back to Him...this is repentance. The next step necessary into maturity is to enter into a struggle with the un-tamed beast within. We cannot take flight, and advance forward without facing personal sin and the passions. Sin is described by liturgical texts as a "lion, roaring and seeking to devour the soul."

The beast represents the inner passions when left un-healed. Facing uncontrolled sinful habits begins the transformative and healing process of living in God's grace. Only then, can we begin to take flight and live as Christ has destined us to live!

Each step towards progress in the spiritual life is marked with making a connection with Christ. I must first connect through faith; which allows me to connect through prayer and fasting; which allows me to connect through repentance and the cleansing the heart; which leads me to an inner transformation; which allows me to become and connect with Christ – Who is our Avatar.

Spiritual re-birth is characterized as living joyfully, free, and whole in the presence of Christ, Who is raised from the dead. "They shall hunger no longer, nor shall they thirst any longer, nor in any wise shall the sun or any heat fall on them; "for the Lamb, the One in the midst of the throne, shall shepherd them, and shall guide them to fountains of waters of life, and God shall wipe away every tear from out of their eyes (Rev. 7:16,17)." We cannot wipe away the tears, the death, illnesses, disappointments, brokenness and divisiveness of life – only when we are connected to Christ through

repentance can He become the Good Shepherd in our lives. Repentance is our guide to the waters of salvation that bring the soul to life and living abundantly. Salvation is drinking from these waters which produce the Christ-like virtues we long to see in ourselves and one another. "The possession of virtue on the other hand, where it is once firmly established, is neither contained by time nor limited by satiety. It always offers its disciples the ever-fresh experience of the fullness of its own delights. Therefore God the Logos promises to those who hunger for these things that they shall be filled (Gregory of Nyssa)."

"As many, therefore, as are children of the light also become sons of the day which is to come, and are enabled to walk decently as in the day. The day of the Lord will never come upon them, because they are already in it forever and continually (St. Symeon the New Theologian)."

May the Light of Christ ever shine and illumine the hearts of those that love Him.  
In Christ's Love,  
+Fr. Andrew