

In 1994, a movie, "Forrest Gump," captured the hearts of many. It was about a slightly retarded and awkward boy raised by a single mom, being lucky at just about everything—had a beautiful girlfriend, was a good runner, demonstrated military valor in the battle fields, and then struck rich later in the stock investment. It was a heart-warming story of a man who overcame many disadvantages and became successful. The movie was wildly acclaimed in the US, but was somehow virtually ignored overseas.

Then this Academy Award season, "Slumdog Millionaire," a movie about an orphan who grows up in a slum of Mumbai, India, swept 8 Oscars. I have yet to see this movie. A slumdog, as the orphans of the slums are contemptuously called, the leading character, lived through his abject poverty. He was able to answer all the impossible questions and win the 20 million rupees against other well-educated and well-to-do competition, in a game show

equivalent of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" His life experience somehow provided the correct answers to the questions, and even though he was uneducated, when he reflected upon the lessons of his own life, he could find the answers. The movie did not win many hearts in India for some reasons, but obviously won many hearts in the West.

The acclaimed writer, Salman Rushdie, apparently had a great difficulty with this movie. He criticized that the movie piled impossibility upon impossibilities.

I guess Rushdie is right in the sense that there are not many who grew up in a poverty-stricken slum with no education actually could compete against well-educated people, and win. Is he being sour, because none of his books made into a movie? Or, does he have a valid point? Or, should some one tell him, hey, lighten up, this is only a movie?

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When we think about it, there are not many retarded children who grew up and became successful like Forrest Gump in whatever situations they found themselves, despite their ever-present adversities. In real life, hardly no one would recruit them for sports or business, and certainly, not for any combat or valor.

When we think about it, the movie, Gump, also piled impossibility upon impossibilities. I especially thought it was absurd to have him run through the rain of bombs and bullets with a wounded GI on his back without getting a scratch. It is not like running through the field with the football in your arm.

There is a reality which we want to see and believe to exist. Our secret yearnings, our desires to escape from the harsh reality are, to a certain degree, fulfilled in these movies produced in Hollywood. We are entertained and influenced by these visual

presentations. It might be said that our perception of the reality is part-Hollywood. You may disagree, saying, "Hey, I am not delusional." But we may not even realize that our sense of the reality is not 100% real. We tend to make up the void with our imaginations, prejudices, and, yes, things of Hollywood.

A case in point: most of us watched the movie, The Ten Commandments. It was a great epic movie by Cecil B. DeMille in 1956, starring Charlton Heston. How did God issue the Ten Commandments to the Israelites, according to Cecil, do you remember? God inscribed the letters with a flame. But who knows, whether God actually used high temperature plasma, or if Moses chiseled on the slab of rocks what he heard in the air?

Here is the shocker: did you know that an old legal code, Codex Hammurabi, of circa 1790 BCE (Before Christian Era), contains many of the provisions found in the Mosaic Law that is compiled circa 1380 BCE? The

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Mosaic Law had been preceded by at least 400 years, by the sixth Babylonian king Hammurabi. If you thought that the Ten Commandments were the Hebrew God's original idea, you will be left confounded, because the last six Commandments had been already covered in Codex Hammurabi.

Is it possible that Moses borrowed from Codex Hammurabi? If so, then it is not really the Hebrew God who issued the first edition of the Ten Commandments. Then what is the point of right-wing Christians fighting to install the stone monument of the Ten Commandments in the courthouse, and all that silly brouhaha surrounding the issue? Or, was it just a coincidence that Babylonian king and the Hebrew God agreed on some aspects of life? Or, does any developed civilization enact such law provisions as commonly as another? How does that grab you, as far as your sense of what God's Law in the Bible should be is concerned? How much did

Hollywood influence your perception of reality?

We have heard about the American Dream. For all the immigrants and natives alike, the American Dream is there to be fulfilled. The basic premise of this dream is: "Why not me? I can do it, too." If there are only a handful of people who can make this dream, however, then the American Dream is as mythical as the aforementioned movies are fantastic. The American Dream becomes real, when you and me, or just about anyone with a good head on the shoulder with a working pair of hands, *can* achieve that Dream.

Forrest Gump is a fantasy, because there is only one Gump, and it is found only in the Hollywood imagination. Slumdog Millionaire is a fantasy, because there is only one, and that is found only on the movie screens. Yet, these fantasies captured the minds in the West, and masked the harsh reality to which many are consigned for their lifetimes.

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You cannot escape the reality of the slum, if you were born in it and lived in it as an orphan. Yet that reality is stepped over, and the counter-reality is splashed over the million silver screens. The possibility of living that reality is as likely as hitting the lottery jackpot. First time, maybe. Second time in a row, almost impossible. Third time in a row? Never. The Mumbai slum has yet to produce a single millionaire among the ranks of the orphans.

What is going to happen to the child stars of the movie, 10 years from now? What is going to happen to other orphans, to those slum dwellers, 10 years from now? For the absolute majority, their reality is an unending and recurring nightmare that plays every day.

Was Forrest Gump trying to shed light upon the lives of those who are born with birth defects? Was Slumdog Millionaire trying to educate the world about the need of the reform so that the slum

will eventually turn into an integral part of the city plan? Were the movies trying to inform the blissfully ignorant public, and incite the world so that they would respond to the needs of those who are suffering? Well, I doubt it. That sort of movies never make any money, and never get any Oscars.

Jesus came to this world, and his message from the outset was: "Repent, and believe in the good news." He did not tell that message to the kings who occupy the palaces. He proclaimed that message to the regular folk who had to work hard to make their ends meet. If Jesus came today, he would have come to where we live, and proclaim that message to the working stiffs, single moms, the foreclosed, the sick, the poor, the immigrants, and any one who has ears to hear.

It was not the criminals and crooks who did a lot of awful things whom Jesus targeted for repentance. It was the regular people, ordinary folk, just like

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you and me whom Jesus targeted for repentance.

The victims of crime are considered innocent, and only the offenders are sentenced guilty. But in God's eyes, both victims and the offenders need to repent. What God requires often contradicts what we think. The victims may think, "I did not do anything wrong. All I did was trying to make ends meet. All I did was dreaming the American Dream. I attended the church and sang in the choir and taught in the Sunday school. I put in my honest hours, but I am still jobless and foreclosed without any health insurance."

It is not only what we did that we need to repent about. If we think it is just the crime we did or did not do that mattered to repentance, then, just about everyone here is innocent and righteous. Just about everyone here is going to heaven, and just about everyone here has very little to repent. The message to repent challenges us, instead, to examine the way we look at the

world, the way we expect things, and the way we entitle ourselves.

Repentance has to do with our ingrained perspective that we have formed over our life time, the world view that we take for granted, the opinion that we guard as sacred. Unless we repent in our fundamental being, that is, unless our perspective on things, our sense of entitlement, and our opinions change, our action will never change.

In other words, unless we change the way we fantasize, the slums in Mumbai remain slum, despite the nice movie. Hollywood will continue to make movies in which unlikely losers become successful. There would be more Forrest Gumps, there would be pretty prostitutes with the heart of gold, there would be enough number of maverick heroes with the flawed personality who sets things right, and everyone would feel good, and enjoy the celebration of Academy Awards later. But the pain and suffering in this world will not abate.

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There is a reason why Forrest Gump failed overseas. Gump failed to convince the rest of the world the American way of looking at things. Simply, most of the world looks at things quite apart from the way Americans do. There is a reason why Slumdog Millionaire failed in India. Slumdog's harsh depiction of the slums did not please the sense of pride which an average Indian person keeps. No one likes to show off the dirty laundry, unless it belongs to someone else, and the dirty laundry did not belong to the West, obviously.

Yet the West will want to believe that these "losers" have a fair shot at their success. Life is not that bad for them, they are saying. In reality, the slum dwellers continue to grind out their daily existence in the open sewers and mounds of garbage. And that is exactly what Jesus is asking us to repent: change our way of looking at things; change our way of fantasizing; change our way of believing. That is, don't try to convince yourselves that a millionaire can rise from a slum.

Even if one rises, it makes no difference to the rest who are wallowing in the slum. Jesus is not focused on one millionaire, but on the rest of the slum.

Hollywood wants us to believe that even a mildly retarded one, or even a slumdog, has a chance to be a millionaire. What Hollywood tells us is, "Yes, you too can become a millionaire!"

That is a very powerful message, because that is what everyone wants. What Hollywood does not tell us, however, is that unless you become a millionaire, Hollywood cannot notice you. If you are a single mom, if you cannot afford the healthcare, if you are laid off, if you cannot pay the mortgage, if your spouse dumped you, if you are not good-looking, if you are not rich and famous, you are invisible and ignorable. How much does our society value those people, when they cannot hold on to their jobs, houses, and spouses, or afford the healthcare?

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Jesus told everyone to repent. Then Jesus provided the alternative: believe in the good news. "It all sounds good," one may comment. "I think I get it. I will repent the way I think and believe. But what is the good news I am supposed to believe?"

What can be the good news to those who lost jobs? What is the good news to those who have no healthcare? What is the good news to those whose houses are foreclosed? What is the good news to those who must struggle with relationships?

Who respects them, when they struggle with these issues? What would restore their humanity and dignity? Do you have dignity, if you are laid off? Are you still human, if you lack the medical insurance? Are you respectable, if you can't pay the mortgage? Our society seems to treat those who lack these things with disrespect. Should these things be the sources of our dignity and respect?

What Jesus wants us to believe is that God created us, and God loves us, and God wants to restore us, so that we may be made whole. And this time, we do not need to be a millionaire, in order to be loved and respected, to be fulfilled and happy. All we need to believe is that God loves us the way God made each one of us. We do not have to try to become anything else, because we are already something. We are worth a lot more than our society teaches us to believe.

This is the good news: We are sufficient the way God made each one of us. God accepts us the way we are, and God wants to restore us, so that we could live the life the way God intended.

You can be the person whom God made you to be. You can fulfill the life God intended you to live. You can have life and have it abundantly. And we can love one another, as Jesus loved us. If this isn't the good news to believe, I do not know what is.

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The kingdom of God is at hand.
Let us repent, and believe in the
good news.