

February 13 - Bread of Life

In 2000 a lovely film called *Chocolat* was released. Anyone seen it? It won several Academy Awards including Best picture, best actress and best supporting actress. The story takes place in a small French village. The village is staunchly Catholic and the setting is the beginning of Lent in 1959.

The village is controlled by a very rigid mayor who feels it is his obligation as mayor to maintain an iron grip on the morals of the village. A very new, young priest, with a love for American rock and roll, is under the thumb of the mayor. The mayor even reviews and edits his homilies to make them fit better with his views of morality. The atmosphere of the village could best be described as somber. No joy. Lifeless even.

As the movie begins, a narrator speaks: Once upon a time, there was a quiet little village in the French countryside, whose people believed in *Tranquilité* - Tranquility. If you lived in this village, you understood what was expected of you. You knew your place in the scheme of things. And if you happened to forget, someone would help remind you. In this village, if you saw something you weren't supposed to see, you learned to look the other way. If perchance your hopes had been disappointed, you learned never to ask for more. So through good times and bad, famine and feast, the villagers held fast to their traditions. Until, one winter day, a sly wind blew in from the North...

At that point, the scene cuts from shots of the village to a woman and child, both dressed in red capes and carrying suitcases, bent over against the wind, making their way into the village.

The mother, Vianne, rents a dusty boarded up pastry shop from an elderly woman, Armande, played by Judi Dench. Armande does not fit the mayor's idea of a model citizen. In her own words, she swears, reads dirty books and eats and drinks what she pleases.

Vianne cleans up the old pastry shop, decorates it and opens a *chocolaterie*...a chocolate shop. She herself is born of a nomadic people and her father is descended from the Mayans in South America. Her chocolate recipe is a 2000-year-old Mayan recipe that includes chili peppers.

Remember, it's Lent in a rigid Catholic town. A chocolate shop. It's a scandal. The mayor begins an ardent campaign to keep people away from the shop and to keep their Lenten fast.

Vianne is a pagan. She is planning to host a pagan fertility festival on Easter Sunday. Nonetheless, she's clearly a Jesus figure. She has a knack for seeing into people's hearts and identifying their pain and sorrow. And a knack for picking out just the right chocolate that will heal.

Most of the villagers do stay away. But there's a handful of folks...the misfits, broken, outcast...who can't resist. Then there's the River Rats...a gypsy like group that floats into town and parks their ramshackle flotilla on the riverbank. As you might imagine, they're not welcomed by most of the village. They are assumed to be thieves, and worse.

It's a beautiful film with lots of spiritual themes. If you've not seen it, I highly recommend it. It's on YouTube for free.

But the scene I most want to talk about is about mid-film. Armande, Judi Dench's character, is turning 70 and she asks Vianne to throw her a birthday party. There's not much confidence that most of the village will come...it's just not proper.

But Vianne goes ahead with the party. The attendees are all the misfits and outcasts...Vianne's daughter whose closest friend is an imaginary kangaroo with a bad leg, Armande, whose daughter keeps her from her grandson because she's a bad influence. The grandson is also there, behind his mother's back. He's a lonely over-protected boy who draws macabre scenes of death.

There's a woman who has run away from her abusive husband. A sort of eccentric older man who takes his little dog everywhere. He has a romantic interest in a woman who is still acutely grieving and has put her life on hold after her first husband died in World War I. A couple who's tired, dull marriage received a jolt from just the right chocolate. And then there's Roux, the notorious River Rat.

So they're all seated around a beautifully set table on a patio. Vianne begins bringing the food out...roast turkey and gravy, crab legs, wine, bread...it's a feast. Still a little uncertain at first, knowing there could be big trouble if the mayor finds out, they begin to eat. There are few things more sensual than eating – it involves all of our senses. You can almost smell and taste the food in this scene.

As they eat the delicious food, the sounds of muted talk give way to loud chatter and laughter. The little group of misfits comes to life. Loving looks are exchanged. It might be one of the best scenes I've ever seen of what I imagine the heavenly banquet might look like. This little band of misfits is healed and brought from death to life by Vianne's food, beginning with her chocolate.

As the plot unfolds and takes its twists and turns, the whole village gradually comes to life through Vianne and her chocolate. And on Easter Sunday, resurrection begins when the young priest preaches his own homily instead of one the mayor has redacted. He begins by saying this morning I want to talk about not Jesus' divinity, but his humanity.

After mass, the entire village turns out for the pagan festival. There's a striking contrast between the early grey, somber images of the village and its transformation to a colorful, joyful celebration...a resurrection.

I think this is what Jesus is talking about here in this passage. Bread of life has two meanings. But they're not separate. And together, they bring us from death to life.

In the movie, it was In the chocolate...in the birthday meal...physical food is brought together with something spiritual. And when that is shared, life is the result.

One can imagine something like that happening there on that grassy place on a hill by the Sea of Galilee. The people have come there to hear Jesus, to maybe take advantage of his healing abilities. They are hungry...physically and spiritually. As the seemingly unending supply of bread and fish is passed around, the crowd comes to life.

As they share the meal, as they hear Jesus speak, the sense that something big is happening grows. Then Jesus goes into that weird monolog about eating his body and drinking his blood. Many of the people there turned away. But that's exactly what incarnation means – that spiritual and material are joined in a way that brings life.

This is as close as John's gospel gets to describing what we now call Holy Communion, or the Eucharist, or Lord's supper. But it gives us perhaps the most graphic image of what happens in communion. We eat a little bread and take a sip of wine.

And we understand that we are eating Christ's body and blood...that we are receiving the spiritual baked into the material. And it becomes a part of us. Jesus becomes a part of us. And like any feast, it's a very sensual experience – it involves all our senses, our bodies. Because again, incarnation. Jesus is now incarnate in us.

The other part of this communion is that we share it together. Any shared meal has a sort of spiritual component. Like the band of misfits at Vianne's party, there is more going on than just the sustenance of our bodies. It's even more so with communion where we are truly sharing the same body and blood of Jesus. And it brings us from death to life.

So after all this talk about chocolate, maybe you're hungry for some. We wouldn't say this was communion. But it can still be special moment in which we all share the sensual joy of good chocolate...together.