



Forgiveness in Hollywood

by Jonathan Aitken

IF THERE WERE OSCARS FOR OXYMORONS, the phrase “Spiritual Hollywood” would surely win many nominations. But a recent visit to Tinseltown by your High Spirits correspondent proved full of surprises on this front. Inspired by a new movie and by a new church, I can report on an intriguing new spiritual trend in the world’s filmmaking capital that runs counter to the flow of its traditional hedonism and secularism.

The inspirational movie is Clint Eastwood’s *Invictus*, a biopic that tells the story of Nelson Mandela’s early months as the first black president of South Africa. Morgan Freeman gives a sensitive and superlative performance as Mandela struggling to lead his fractured country toward reconciliation. The unlikely first test of this aspiration focuses on the efforts of the Springbok rugby football team (idolized by whites, ostracized by blacks) to make a comeback from its locust years of apartheid exclusion from international sports competitions.

The linear story line of *Invictus* is all about Mandela subtly mentoring the Springboks’ captain (Matt Damon) as the team overcomes a plethora of off-field and on-field obstacles to become a serious competitor for the 1995 World Cup. But the deeper message of the movie is all about forgiveness.

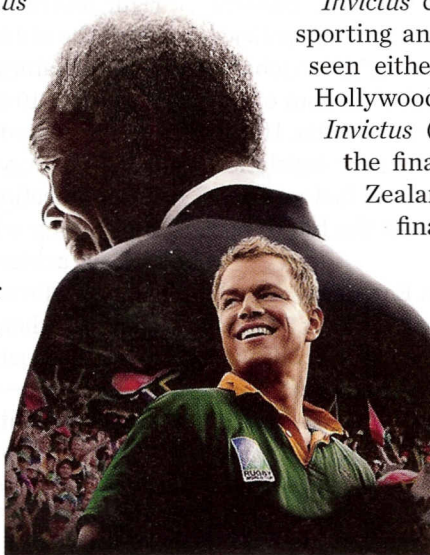
An early scene, on the day after Mandela has taken the oath of office, is a confrontation between the new black presidential bodyguards and the old SAS-trained white special branch officers from the de Klerk era whom Mandela has decreed should be included in his close protection detail. The black com-

mander of the squad confronts the president with fierce objections. Morgan Freeman delivers his response with a blend of magnanimity and magisterial authority. “Reconciliation and forgiveness begin here,” he says. “Forgiveness liberates the soul.”

This new take on liberation theology, a most refreshing contrast with the unforgiving radicalism of the militant Catholic priests in South America who annexed this phrase in the 1960s, becomes the leitmotif of the story. Seen through the prism of the Springboks’ progress toward the final of the World Cup, more and more South Africans become liberated by the spirit of mutual forgiveness and reconciliation. The bodyguards bond across racial barriers. White families take their black maids to the matches. Policemen listen to the sports broadcasts with street urchins. Hooligans from the townships are given rugby lessons by the stars of the national team. A rainbow nation moves from a political slogan to becoming a human reality.

Invictus comes to a climax that is both sporting and spiritual. I have never before seen either a rugby football match or a Hollywood movie that ends with praying.

Invictus (a true story) does both. After the final whistle of the dramatic New Zealand vs. South Africa World Cup final, Matt Damon takes his players into a huddle, saying to the black star of the team, “Chester, lead us in a prayer, will you?” It turns out to be simply “Thanks, Lord, for the win,” a reminder perhaps that when the unforgiving forgive they achieve great victories over themselves as well as for the common good.



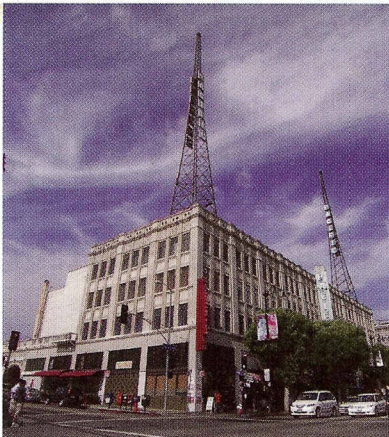
DURING MY SOJOURN IN HOLLYWOOD I saw *Invictus* twice. This was partly in preparation for my speaking engagement at an iconic building in the city, the old Pacific Theater built in 1927-1928 by the Warner brothers at 6433 Hollywood Boulevard, along the Walk of Fame. On Sunday mornings this disused edifice is miraculously transformed into a thriving church. Its crumbling baroque architecture is deceptive because its interior looks much like any other movie theatre, with soft drinks and popcorn stands in the foyer, plush red seating, and state-of-the-art sound and lighting systems operated by youthful techies talking the language of filmmaking with commands like “strike,” “cut,” and “wrap” as they prepare for the presentation of the worship.

Outside the theater the Sunday billboards proclaim, “Welcome to *Ecclesia*—your Hollywood church.” Like the original first-century ecclesia (the gatherings of the early Christians), this one started small. When I first gave a talk to its founders five years ago, the entire congregation could be squeezed into the living room of D. Paul Thomas, a professional actor blessed with the spiritual gifts to become a church leader. He pulled together a handful of worshippers who had grown disenchanted by some complicated feudings at their local Presbyterian church. This breakaway group was joined by seekers from all denominations. Their common bond was an enthusiasm for informal worship buttressed by serious preaching of the word. Bored by the traditions of established churches yet underwhelmed by the happy-clappyism of the charismatics, the *Ecclesia* pioneers built a church that today has a Sunday attendance of 600 regular worshippers—and counting.

In one sense *Ecclesia* is typical of its neighborhood, because most of the congregation seemed to be hip, young, cool, and directly or indirectly involved in the movie industry. But this is a Hollywood crowd with a difference. Its priority is to worship God rather than celebrities.

Apparently a handful of A-list names from screen, soaps, and studios do frequently come to *Ecclesia*'s services, but no one makes a fuss of them. “We deliberately preserve a space for anonymity,” says D. Paul Thomas. “If anyone does any networking here it is about our prayer groups and our social

action programs. We are probably the city's most active church in terms of working on the streets among the lost, the homeless, and the needy.”



BENEATH THE SUPERFICIAL GLITZ of Tinseltown, a lot of 21st-century Hollywoodians are spiritually needy. These days a collective noun to describe a group of the local thespians is a *moan* of actors. More of them are unemployed than ever before. Even those fortunate enough to be working are mostly on the minimum Screen Actors Guild wage rates—a consequence of two failed union strikes in recent years. The mounting

uncertainty of such pressures in the world of movies and mammon is one explanation for the quietly growing interest in the values and virtues of religious faith.

Fundamental to the success of *Ecclesia* is the reading and preaching of the word. The customary 10-minute sermons of Episcopalian-lite liberalism would not work here. I was asked to speak for 30 minutes with a theological exegesis of a biblical text, ending in a personal challenge to the congregation. So I focused on Psalm 130, which is all about waiting for God in life's depths, eventually climbing out of them by prayer, patience, forgiveness, and redemption.

Like many spiritual subjects, such themes are hard to illustrate visually. But I was rescued from this difficulty by the arrival of the movie world cavalry in the form of Clint Eastwood, Morgan Freeman, Matt Damon, and all the other stars and makers of *Invictus*. For its portrayal of Nelson Mandela's patient incarceration for 27 years on Robben Island, his forgiveness of the apartheid system, and the reconciliation and redemption of his people could not be a better modern on-screen example of the Psalmist's rescue from the depths from whence he cries out in the opening verse of Psalm 130. *Ecclesia* got the point. To paraphrase the famous hymn: Hollywood moves in a mysterious way, its wonders to perform. 🌿

Jonathan Aitken is most recently author of John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace (*Crossway Books*). His biographies include Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (*Doubleday*) and Nixon: A Life, now available in paperback (*Regnery*).