



IMAGO DEI

IN THE
IMAGE
OF GOD

#10 HOW SHOULD WE WORSHIP?

We've come to the final study of the "image of God" said to be in humanity by God's design and purpose. And today we ask of the Bible, in the light of the Gospel of Jesus, how should we worship God?



For this sermon I shall tell you a story of another world, not far removed from ours. This is Kumandra, with its five clans, each being of very different appearance, of different values and different aspirations. Note the interesting shape of the land carefully. Long ago Kumandra existed as **one people** where peace and harmony was maintained in one united world with the help of **benevolent dragons**.



Meet Raya. She's the main character of our story, and lives in the land of Kumandra. Through her story, I want to reflect on the Bible's message to humanity about living in a manner that honours God and best represents God by our words and actions on earth – how we should worship God.



Throughout Lent we've studied the meta-narrative of the bible asking what it means to be **human**; to be made in the **image of God**. This new story from Disney called *Raya and the Last Dragon*, either by accident, or by careful design, beautifully **follows the Bible's** salvation **story arc** we know so well. Let me tell you some of Raya's story...



Raya asks the question in the opening monologue of this Disney animated feature film, “How did this land (of Kumandra) **get so broken?**”

We too have seen, in the creation narratives of the Bible, that human’s have long asked this question about our own world.



Like our world, Kumandra has a **back story**. It's peoples' history and plight is told drawing from myths and legends of **five different** contemporary **South-east Asian** nations in our world.



500 years before Raya was born, a **force of evil** appeared in Kumandra known as **Druun**. The Druun preyed on the potential in people to **turn against each other**. As a result of the peoples' susceptibility to evil, almost all people and dragons alike were **turned to stone** by the Druun.



But a **last remaining dragon**, named **Sisu**, with magical powers that could repel the evil Druun, ended the reign of terror through an act of great sacrifice. Sisu's sacrifice resembles closely the proverb from the lips of Jesus heard in our reading from the Gospel of John today:

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13)

Sisu then disappeared, but she left behind a large precious **gemstone** containing the **last of the dragon magic** in Kumandra keeping the Druun at bay.



In Raya's time, Kumandra is split into **5 clans named after parts of the legendary dragon** – Fang, Talon, Spine, Tail, and Raya's clan – Heart. The five clans now **live independently BUT at enmity** with each other. The last dragon is fondly remembered but has **not been seen** for many generations.



To further add suspicion that this story follows the Bible's redemption story by design, Raya is **baptized** into a guild of guardians. Her family was long ago charged with the task of protecting the precious dragon-magic gem: a prize the other clans **plotted to steal** for their own advantage.



Raya's father believes in the **good nature** of people. He calls all five clans together in the nation known as Heart, in the hope that an offer of trust will finally make for peace.



But very quickly, behaviour akin to the “**Twitterverse**” of our world soon unfolds – everybody bickering and jostling for power over the other, seeking the higher moral ground or seeking to seize control of Kumandra’s destiny.



As this takes place, young Raya lets her guard down. She naively invites a young woman from the clan of Fang to witness the gem, but is cleverly **betrayed by the girl** and other members of that clan.

As a result, in a violent exchange, the precious dragon-magic gem is **broken into 5 pieces**. You guessed it! Each of the five clans now possesses one fragment of the gem each as they return to their own homes; remaining enemies.



The **Druun**, the evil force of old, is once again unrestrained now that the gem's power is broken and divided. Many people are once again **turned to stone**, including Raya's father. Raya soon comes to regret the **consequences** of her actions. She vows to defeat evil and **save her father and her land**.



It's usually at this point, in most stories of this kind, that main character rises up as the **hero**. I expected Raya to be the **pure, saviour** figure common to such feature films - a Queen Elsa, a Princess Jasmine, a Captain Marvel or a Wonder Woman. You know how it goes, Hollywood heroines **simply** have to **overcome** the annoying, dumb enemies that stand in their way at this point in most stories of this type. In no time at all it seems, the **day is won**. But here's the thing, this story of Raya and the Last Dragon **doesn't follow** the **usual narrative**. Instead, Raya is **not even** a Christ-like figure in this redemption story.



Raya's morality is compromised, her relationships complex. And here's what caught my attention the most, this movie tackles the question of the **shared plight of all humanity** in our (real) world today. Its main character is, and remains **thoroughly flawed** right to the end. Raya, like humans, needs a power external to herself to transform her errant ways, that she might truly know the peace and justice she so desperately longs to see. Her path is always **fuelled by anger, laced with lies**, and aiming for **victory through violence**. Raya becomes **hardened of heart**, but not yet fully turned to stone.

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We've seen in this series of sermons how the Bible describes humanity as both **amazingly creative** and capable and significant, yet **deeply compromised** within and gripped by self-serving propensity. The Book of Proverbs astutely observes that humans...

“...think they know the right way, but that way leads to death” (Prov. 14:12).

Even Jesus' chief of disciples, Peter, chose the **path of the sword** rather than the path of peace (John 18:10,11). Trusting in a higher power, and trusting other people is the **road least travelled**, by Raya, and by humankind.



Out of love for her father Raya bands together with one other broken and flawed character from each of the other four clans. Together they set out to steal back each **piece of the broken gem** across Kumandra hoping to restore the gem, and save themselves.



Along the way Raya has a somewhat **spiritual encounter**. As she prays for help in a mysterious cave she stumbles upon the presence of the missing last dragon, **Sisu**. The dragon urges Raya to be a **person of faith and trust**.

“Yeah, well, the world’s broken. You can’t trust anyone,” says **Raya**.

“Or” says **Sisu**, “maybe it’s broken, because you don’t trust anyone.”

Sisu explains that Kumandra’s shared problem and plight will only be solved through **friendship and sacrifice**; not by way of Raya’s attitude and means.



Will Raya first slay her own **inner Druun**? Will she remove the **log in her own eye** to then see the speck in the other's eye? Will she **lay down her arms** and choose the way of trust?

No spoilers in this sermon! You'll have to see the movie yourself 😊.

Suffice it to say, Raya will learn that she must **die to herself**; that is, to **lay aside her way of vengeance** and instead to **trust Sisu at her word** about the true path to peace.



Don't worry, Kumandra's story has a **hopeful resurrection** ending. Like our journey through Lent to Easter, we learn that our problems are not the fault of some other species, of bad science, of bad government, or of some mysterious spiritual being. Humans, though **wonderful**, are fundamentally **flawed**. **We need God's transforming** love and mercy through Christ. We **lack trust in God** and prefer own designs to **save ourselves**. In complete contrast, the Bible tells how Jesus demonstrated the **path to peace** that truly **displaces evil** as **dying to oneself** – that is, to die to **our way** of saving and ruling our own lives. Jesus invites us to be reconciled to God and to one another by mere trust in His Word and His way.



Jesus too drew upon images attuned to the cultures his audience could relate to – for example, picturing a trusting relationship with God as like vines and grapes in a vineyard.*

Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:4-5)

* (The Old Testament back story of his Jewish disciples envisioned Israel

as a vineyard tended by God e.g. Ezek. 28:26)



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This is an **unexpected answer** to our question ‘**How should we worship God?**’ Jesus calls us to live with **trust** in His Word – to lay down our arms; to lay aside our preferred path for saving our lives. Trust in Christ is provides forgiveness and inner transformation we so desperately need. Trust in Christ also leads us along the path to love, mercy and peace in daily living. Only then, might we truly say, we **worship God** as God intends – to trust, to have faith. Only then might we truly say that we once again truly **bear the image of God** on earth.

Steve Webster, Easter 2021