

## **HOTEL RWANDA**

US., 2004, 121 minutes

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### Dialogue with the Scriptures

Focus: Both the book of Isaiah and Jesus in Matthew emphasise that we will be judged on the charity and justice we exercise rather than our devout practices. In helping the Tutsis during the genocide, Paul Rusesabiniga emerged as a man of justice.

The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a genocide in Africa that was cruel and vicious, the heritage of tribal enmities that had been fostered by imperial colonising powers and that the world was slow in acknowledging and dealing with. Hotel Rwanda is a cry for justice to a world audience ten years after the events where Tutsis and Bwa were massacred by Hutus, stirred on by hatred. For those who hunger and thirst for justice, they may have to wait a long time before being satisfied.

The oracles of the book of Isaiah were spoken in the hindsight of the devastation of Jerusalem in 587 BC and the majority of the population of Judaea being taken into exile in Babylon. The text in chapter 58 focuses on fasting. However, it repeats the theme that fasting without justice makes no impression on God. Setting the oppressed free, breaking every yoke, sharing bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and homeless, clothing the naked when you see them – this is what true religion is. The prophet also adds, 'not turning your back on your own'.

This is what Paul Rusesabagina does when suddenly confronted by the Hutu uprising. A Hutu himself, he had a Tutsi wife, the mother of his children. In his role as the manager of the prestigious Kigali Milles Collines hotel, he moved amongst the local rich and famous as well as international visitors. A dapper man, he believed in good manners, efficient work and elegant style. His world is turned upside down.

His response, not a sudden overwhelming heroism, but a gradual response to ever-worsening situations, is the charity and justice that the scriptures exhort us to. He had to improvise, exert pressure where he could, try to maintain orderliness amongst the refugees in his hotel, help the Red Cross save children, negotiate with the United Nations officers, all the time emotionally anxious about his family. This is heroism in an ordinary man who never anticipated that his life would go in these directions.

Jesus knew the scriptures and quoted them. He takes up the theme of Isaiah 58 in his final parable in Matthew's Gospel. Borrowing from the prophet Ezekiel as well (34:17-24), Jesus set up a dramatic final judgment scene. The ultimate criteria for being saved, for being devoted to God, are the works of justice and charity, care for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the strangers, the prisoners. The ultimate sin is neglecting these neglected people. In this light, Paul Rusesabagina is presented as heroic and, using a word that might be surprising but fits with the words of Jesus, 'saintly'.

Paul can only contribute what he is capable of doing. He cannot defend the refugees with military might. He can give only limited advice. He can find only basic supplies and then from racketeers. This brings us to the words of Paul about the body and its parts.

Paul explores the theme of the body of Christ, the Church. He elaborates in sensible detail how feet can only be feet, hands can only be hands... If the body is to function as a whole, then each part must do its best, its finite and limited best. Paul also elaborates how each person is not just simply a part of the body of Christ and the Church: some are apostles, prophets, teachers, people of action, healers, assistance, administration... For those who

hunger and thirst after justice, collaboration with all those involved in their different ways, is the way to achieve justice.

The passage from Isaiah finishes its eulogy of justice and charity speaks of rebuilding destroyed ruins and restoring order – a perspective on the aftermath of the Rwanda genocide and ten years of trying to build up a traumatised nation and people.