

Archbishop Smith: The Real Endgame

You've probably heard many homilists use as an analogy for their preaching the latest film in the Avengers series: Endgame. I've done the same, especially when speaking with young Confirmation candidates. I expect the principal difference between myself and other preachers here is that I really don't have a clue what I'm talking about. (Many would suggest this is not the only instance!) I haven't seen any Avengers movie, a confession that elicits instant and horrified shock from the children.

What is attracting my attention is the title of the film. What is the "endgame" of this series? On this question I have noticed that people are hypersensitive if they have not yet seen the movie. No spoilers, please! I find it fascinating how the movie, and this question in particular, is riveting the attention of people across the age spectrum.

Would that we all were so captivated by an endgame of far greater significance. This one deals not with make-believe but with reality. It is not a passing fad, the attraction of which wanes with time, but a foundational touchstone of perennial relevance. Learning the Avengers endgame, although interesting in itself, nevertheless does not change the way we live. Embracing this other endgame changes one's life forever.

I am speaking of the endgame of the Lord Jesus himself. It is given to us in the Gospel narrative proclaimed at mass this past Sunday (John 21:1-19), when Jesus poses the question to Peter: "Do you love me?" That's the endgame! All that Jesus did in obedience to the will of his Father was aimed at drawing out from each of us the answer to this question. The love of God for His people is on full, unparalleled display in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By this love, Jesus seeks to draw us to a response of answering love and thereby into communion with God's own life! Here we are given the meaning and destiny of human existence. Everything depends upon the answer we give to this question.

I love the beautiful analysis of this particular encounter between Jesus and Peter offered by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, and refer to it often. You can find it in his general audience of May 24, 2006. There he pointed out that, in the Gospel passage, our one English word, "love", is used to translate two distinct Greek verbs. The first two times that Jesus poses to Peter the question, "Do you love me?", he uses *agapao*, which refers to a total and unconditional love. Jesus begins the dialogue by asking Peter if he loves him with this kind of total love. However, Peter replies with the verb *fileo*, the love of a friend, implying affection, certainly, but not a total gift of self. In other words, Peter, acutely aware of his recent betrayal and his weakness, tells Jesus that all he can offer is his weak human love. Strikingly, the third time Jesus poses the question he changes the verb and asks "Fileis me?", that

is to say, "Will you at least love me as you can? I am willing to accept and work with that." Pope Benedict observes how Jesus adapts himself to Peter and not the other way around. The Lord accepts us, as he accepted Peter, where we are, and works in and through our weakness to transform us, strengthen us, make us true disciples and draw us into a communion of love. All he asks is that we love him as we can and leave the rest up to him.

We may not know the endgame of the Avengers series, but we can certainly live without that awareness. Not so with that of our Lord. His endgame is, in fact, not an end at all, but a love that never ends. Let's embrace that love by responding to the Lord, under grace, with our own. Only then shall we know what true life really is.