On superheroes…

Last weekend, the first blockbuster movie of the summer was be released: Marvel's *Avengers: Infinity War*. (In case you're wondering, yes, I did have a ticket to see it at 8 p.m. on opening night.) For Marvel Studios, *Infinity War* is the nineteenth movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), which was launched in 2008 with the release of *Iron Man*. The eighteen preceding movies have grossed nearly $15 billion dollars, and *Infinity War* has now become biggest domestic movie opening weekend in movie history, which previously belonged to *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* ($248 million).

> To say that superhero movies are big business these days is probably an understatement. These numbers represent a ridiculous amount of money, no question, but it also raises another question: why are we so willing to go and see them? From a faith perspective, I can see three reasons.

The first reason is this: as human beings, we both love and need stories. Stories entertain us, and stories teach us about ourselves, about others, and about God.

In his introduction to On the Shoulders of Hobbits Louis Markos speaks of the value of stories. He points out that in the past, stories were used to often used to teach moral lessons.

This is why in every age we seem to find storytellers playing their trade in every sort of venue imaginable: from the page to the stage, and today on screens of every size. It also helps us understand why parables made up a significant part of Jesus' ministry. Markos suggests that today **"…we need a fresh infusion of story: one that will propel us back into the full romance of living."** Superhero movies are one way our culture has been filling in that gap, providing stories that draw us in and often which teach moral lessons.

The second reason is that every superhero has what we call an 'origin story.'

This means that every hero comes from a set of experiences that gave them their abilities and the motivation to do good for others. These experiences are often difficult and sometimes tragic. Superheroes are able to grow beyond these experiences, exemplifying what is meant by St. Paul when he writes: **"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose"** (*Romans 8:28*).

One example is Bruce Wayne/Batman. Bruce was born into a wealthy family in the fictional Gotham City. At a young age, he fell into a dry well and was attacked by bats — giving him a distinctive fear of these creatures. Later in life, his

parents were killed during an armed robbery and Bruce would be raised by Alfred, the family butler. These experiences inspired Bruce to direct much of the family fortune towards crime-fighting and shape the hero we now know as Batman.

Every hero has a unique story like this, and when we see or hear them, we can't help but think of our own origin stories. Our stories can include circumstances in our lives beyond our control (where we live, the makeup of our families, etc) and some of choices we've made for good or for ill that contribute to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We want to be like the superheroes; seeing past our struggles and failures and learning to use those experiences to build the Kingdom.

Finally, superhero stories play on a particular human desire: the wish that things in our world ought to be different.

I have never met anyone who looks around at the world and says that things are the way they're supposed to be. We see pain, disaster, loneliness, poverty, hatred, and the like, and we wonder how it could be that a loving God could stand by and let all of this happen.

The thing is, God agrees with our sentiments in these matters; we don't live in a world that works the way He intended it to. By midway through the third chapter of Genesis, sin has entered the world — an event which brought to humanity the experiences of suffering and dying (which were not part of God's original plan for us.) So, we look at the world around us, and wish that we could do something to make it better.

Superheroes are those who, unlike most of us, have the will and the abilities to change the world for the better.

I'm not going to spoil the movie for you, but if you choose to go and see it, keep your eyes open for the ways in which *Infinity War* is one of those stories which can both inspire and challenge, while still providing a couple of hours of entertainment. Yes, it brings together heroes whom we have already met and whose stories we already know: but you can expect, as is the case in every hero movie, there will be battle fought against an imposing villain. This battle will bring out the best and the worst of them.

Enjoy the movie, but also remember that, as people of faith, it's we have someone far better than a comic book hero to conquer evil: we have Jesus. And He tells us: **"In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world"** (*John 16:33*).