

Walking the Way: Watching the Screen

Most of us love watching films. Could we sometimes make more of our viewing by taking opportunities to seek out ideas that affirm or challenge Christian perspectives?

In a scene from the Oscar-winning film *Lincoln*, the President is waiting with soldiers and politicians for news of a decisive Civil War battle. Those present are tense, knowing that the news about to come through could change the course of the war, and of history. Lincoln smiles to himself and begins to speak, but his secretary of war shouts: 'No! No, you're, you're going to tell a story. I don't believe that I can bear to listen to another one of your stories right now.' And with that, he walks out.

Jesus is renowned for his stories. Like any good teacher, he knew that stories had the ability to shock, amuse, upset, thrill, uncover prejudices, reveal truths, and engage listeners in a way that straightforward teaching often cannot.

In the UK today, around 3.2 million people go to the cinema every week to see films that do the same. Many of these stories support or subvert certain worldviews. Some may convey a message that seems contrary to Christ's teachings, others will offer suggestions about the human condition or the nature of God, sharing fresh revelations or invitations to discussion.

So let's watch and listen, discuss and debate; sharing our time, a story and a bag of popcorn or two as we seek out God's good news at the cinema.

Activity

During Lent, arrange a church trip to the cinema or hold a 'movie night' at your home or in the church hall. Immediately after the film, or in the coming week, discuss the film with one another, considering the following questions:

- What was your response to the film? What did you like/dislike about it?
- Which character(s) did you identify with and why?
- What did the story have to say about human nature?
- Did the film uphold or challenge your view of the world?
- What, if anything, did the story say about God?
- Do you think the story supported or subverted gospel teaching?
- What message did you take from the film?
- Was there any 'good news' in the film? If so, when
- How might you continue to use stories told through film to enhance the ministry and mission of your church?

You could also use film as part of an intentional outreach program. During the six Sundays of Lent, encourage church group visits to the cinema. If you are a minister, why not preach on the themes brought up in six films nominated at the Baftas/Oscars?

If it works better to view films within the church, there are so many to choose from. Ensure you have [appropriate licensing](#) arrangements in place and choose from the following topics:

1: Classic Lent Themed Films

***Chocolat* (12)**

Storyline: A mysterious woman and her daughter open a chocolate shop in a small French village and shake up the rigid morality of the community.

- What do you think about the portrayal of Christianity in the film? Was it a positive, negative or mixed picture?
- In a scene from the film, the priest asks the congregation: 'Where will we find truth?' before the wind (or spirit?) blows the doors of the church open. What do you think this might be saying about where we find 'truth'?
- In another scene, [Josephine Muscat](#) tells Vianne Rocher: 'I heard you don't go to church ... you won't last long here.' What do you think are the main blessings/challenges about living in a society where most people do not attend church?
- Love interest Roux warns [Vianne](#): 'You make friends with us, you'll make enemies of others.' Who do you think are the Church's friends and enemies today?
- Monsieur le *Comte* says: 'All my efforts have been for nothing'. Do you believe that God's response to our prayers and desires is influenced by our actions?
- In his Easter morning address, Father Henri says: 'I think we can't go around measuring our goodness by what we don't do, by what we deny ourselves, what we resist and who we exclude. I think we've got to measure goodness by what we embrace, what we create and who we include.' What are your thoughts on the priest's Easter morning message?
- Where is good news to be found in the film?

***The Way* (12)**

Storyline: A father heads overseas to recover the body of his estranged son who died while traveling the 'El Camino de Santiago' – otherwise known as The Way, or The Way of St James – and decides to take the pilgrimage himself.

- Have you ever been on a pilgrimage or on a trip on which you gained spiritual nourishment/challenge? If so, where did you go and how did you find the experience? If not, would you want to, and why?
- Martin Sheen (the lead actor) is a committed Catholic and outspoken liberal. Do the religious/political views of actors/musicians/artists ever affect the way you view their work? Should it?

- At the beginning of the film, Tom receives a phone call that turns his life upside down. Have you ever received such a call? If so, how did you react and who did you turn to?
- One scene portrays a group of Christians self-flagellating (whipping themselves). This practice, a bodily punishment to show remorse for sin and encourage greater control of the body, came into prominence in medieval western Europe but is still practiced by some religious groups today. How do you view the practice?
- Tom, Jack, Joost and Sarah all seem to have very different reactions to the Cathedral at the end of their pilgrimage. Have you had any memorable reactions to apparently holy places?
- What do you think about the portrayal of Christianity in the film? Was it a positive, negative or mixed picture?
- How might the film be seen as a parable for grief?
- Where is good news to be found in the film?

2: Classic Holy Week Themed Films

Jesus Christ Superstar (PG)

Storyline: This classic rock opera is based loosely on the Gospel accounts of the last week of Jesus' life.

- Was there a quote or a scene that particularly stood out for you?
- Have you seen the film/the stage show before? If so, how did this screening compare?
- Productions of the musical usually weave contemporary imagery into the depiction of Jesus and the disciples – e.g. the disciples as hippies in the 70s, part of the 'Occupy' movement in the early 2010s ... if staged today, who do you think the disciples might be likened to?
- How did you relate to the characters of Judas, Caiaphas and Pilate? Could you empathise with the decisions they made, which led to Jesus being killed on the cross?
- The chief priests describe Jesus as 'dangerous'. Mary Magdalene and Judas both sing the line 'he scares me so' in the song *I Don't Know How To Love Him*. Do you imagine Jesus to be a dangerous character? Does he scare you?
- In the musical, as in the Bible, Jesus knows what Judas is going to do and can even be seen to encourage it. Why do think he does this instead of reasoning with him?

- Judas sings to Jesus: 'All your followers are blind ... too much heaven on their minds'. Do you think this could be a fair criticism of Jesus' followers and/or religious zealots through the ages?
- In a scene from the musical, Jesus sings in the garden of Gethsemane: 'I wanna know ... why should I die? You're far too keen on where and how and not so hot on why.' Do you think Jesus knew why he was heading toward the cross?
- What was your response to the film's ending?
- Where is good news to be found in the film?

Calvary (15):

Storyline: When a good-natured priest is threatened during a confession, he finds he must battle the dark forces closing in around him.

- Do you think Father James should have told the Bishop/the police who had threatened him and/or tried to stop it? Why/why not?
- In his Gethsemane moment, Father James abandons his priest's clothing and is seen about to escape on the plane to Dublin. Why do you think he didn't go?
- Do you think the film gave a positive, critical or balanced view of the priesthood/the Christian faith?
- 'Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.' Why do you think this quote, from influential theologian St Augustine, was shown at the beginning of the film?
- At one point, Father James says to Teresa: 'In situations like this one, people are shocked. The randomness of it. They curse God...they lose their faith in some cases.' She responds: 'They lose their faith? It must have not been much of a faith to begin with if it is so easy for them to lose it.' What do you think about this exchange? Has anything caused you to question or even lose your faith in the past? If you, what helped you to strengthen/find it?
- What parallels/contrasts were there with the biblical telling of Holy Week? Did this retelling cause you to reflect on any parts of the passion in a new way?
- 'The film offers no redemption.' Do you agree with The Christian Post's analysis of the film? Where, if anywhere, is good news to be found in the film?

3: Classic All Age Films

Finding Nemo (U)

Storyline: After his young son is captured in the Great Barrier Reef and taken to Sydney, a timid clownfish sets out on a journey to bring him home.

- At the beginning of the film, Marlon's fears dictate his outlook on life and his relationships. What place does fear have in your life/society/the Church today?
- 'It's time to let go,' Dory says to Marlon. 'Everything's going to be alright.' What might we – as individuals and the Church – need to let go of?
- When Nemo touched the boat, he was taken from the paradise of the reef and from his father. Disobedience led to separation. Many Christians read the story of Adam and Eve in this way. How do you understand that story?
- At the end of the film, it was only in swimming together that the fish escaped their deaths. In our society today, why are so many communal bodies/places struggling? Is our life as a church community attractive to others? Should it be?
- 'It's okay. Daddy's here. Daddy's got you,' says Marlon to Nemo. Jesus called God 'Abba', which some translate as 'Daddy'. Does thinking of God as father, daddy, mother, brother, or friend, change the way you relate to God?
- In the film, Marlon, dives into a dangerous world, makes friends, encounters obstacles and sacrifices his own safety in order to save his child and bring him home. How might Marlon's love for Nemo compare to God's love for us?
- Where is good news to be found in the film?

The Lorax (U)

Storyline: A 12-year-old boy searches for the one thing that will help him to win the affection of the girl of his dreams. To find it, he must discover the story of the Lorax, a grumpy yet charming creature who fights to protect his world.

- Did the film remind you of any stories or passages from the Bible? If so, which ones and why?
- James Watt, former US Secretary of the Interior, once said: 'The earth was put here by the Lord for His people to subdue and to use for profitable purposes on their way to the hereafter. What do you think the film and the Bible have to say about this 'dominion' view of creation?
- In a scene from the film, The Lorax says: 'Which way does a tree fall? ... It falls the way it leans. Be careful which way you lean.' What's your response to this quote?
- The Once-ler challenges The Lorax to prove his authority by showing him some magic and later asks him: 'If you've got a problem with what I'm doing, why don't you use your powers to stop me?' The Lorax replies: 'I told you – that's not how it works.' How might this relate to the way that God guides us and interacts with creation?

- The Lorax left the Once-ler with the word 'unless' to encourage him to reflect on his teaching and consider his own actions. What word or phrase might we want to pass on to the next generation as a challenge or call to live well?
- Where is good news to be found in the film?

Foreign Language Films

Of Gods and Men (15)

Storyline: A group of Trappist monks stationed with an impoverished Algerian community must decide whether to leave or stay when they come under threat by fundamentalist terrorists.

- The monks are happy to attend the Muslim ceremonies in their community. If you have attended worship of another religion or denomination, what challenges and/or blessings did you experience?
- In the film, some villagers are horrified by a deadly attack on Christians in their community and express their incomprehension at those who kill in the name of Islam. One villager says: 'God says in the Quran: 'You kill your brother, you go to hell ... [terrorists] say they're religious. They've never read the Quran.' In what ways do fundamentalist groups who claim to be religious reveal/distort the truths of the religion they claim to represent?
- Christian is accused of being over-indulgent with the terrorists by an army captain. Which groups should our faith inspire us to be over-indulgent with today?
- The monks have vows to keep and accepting safety while leaving their poor neighbours behind would violate everything to which they have devoted their lives. One of the monks, Brother Luc, says: 'We are in a risky situation but we persist in our faith and our confidence in God. It is through poverty, failure and death that we advance towards him.' What is your reaction to these words about Christian living? Should we follow such words in this community? If so, how?
- Do you think the monks should have stayed or left? What, if anything, does their decision accomplish?
- 'Remember that love is eternal hope. Love endures everything.' How do you respond to Christian's words? Is there anything love cannot endure?
- Where is good news to be found in the film?

Hedd Wyn (12)

Storyline: Hedd Wyn, a young poet living in the countryside in North Wales, competes for the most coveted prize in Welsh Poetry – the chair of the National Eisteddfod, a 100-year-old tradition. Before the winner is announced Hedd Wyn gets sent to fight with the English in the trenches of the First World War.

- If you are a Welsh speaker, what difference did it make watching a film in Welsh?
- In one scene, a vicar says: 'If you are on God's side, join now to keep Great Britain great and mighty.' Do you think that clergy/the Church should ever speak for/against participating in conflict?
- The [Belief and Action exhibition](#) by Wales for Peace –explores why some conscientious objectors chose to take the difficult path of resisting conscription in the First World War. One of the questions it asks is 'how can we support soldiers but not war'? What is your response to this?
- Some conservative Christians in America voted for Donald Trump because they thought Hillary Clinton would dilute gun ownership laws. For some Christians, there is no tension between Jesus' teaching and a justified use of violence. Do you think there is ever a time to use violence in order to protect yourself/others or to stand up for what you believe is right?
- 'Real men go to war,' says Lizzie. Is her view still given credence? Does gender or peer pressure play a part in the prevalence of war today?

Ellis asks: 'What use is poetry these days?' What is the purpose of art (or any sort) in a time of war?

- At one point, Germans are referred to as 'the devil's children'. Do you think that we have to dehumanise people in order to let go of our compassion for them? Who does our society dehumanise today and how can we challenge this?
- Where is good news to be found in the film?

Films from the 2010s

***Gravity* (12)**

Storyline: Two astronauts work together to survive after an accident which leaves them stranded in space.

- As Matt returns to Ryan, she asks how he survived, and the radio plays Hank Williams' *Angels Are Hard To Find*. Do you think Matt's return and help is miraculous, a hallucination, and/or the product of an inbuilt survival instinct?
- In one scene, Matt says to Ryan: 'I get it, it's nice up here. You can just shut down all the systems, turn out all the lights and just close your eyes and tune out everybody. There's nobody up here that can hurt you. It's safe. I mean, what's the point of going on? What's the point of living? Your kid died. Doesn't get any rougher than that. But still, it's a matter of what you do now. If you decide to go, then you gotta just get on with it. Sit back, enjoy the

ride. You gotta plant both your feet on the ground and start livin' life.' In what ways, if any, do you relate to Matt's words to Ryan here?

- 'Thank you,' are Ryan's last words as she stands and looks up to the sky. What is your response to this ending?
- What do you think this film might have to say about prayer, suffering or death?
- In his film review for the Guardian, Giles Fraser wrote: 'It's the most beautifully religious thing I have seen in ages ... Religion is something that is now being done better elsewhere, on the telly and in the cinema.'
Do you agree/disagree with his comments? How might this influence the way we 'do' church, evangelism, etc?
- Where is good news to be found in the film?

A Monster Calls (12)

Storyline: A boy seeks the help of a tree monster to cope with his single mother's terminal illness.

- Conor's family do not share with him the truth of his Mum's condition, telling him: 'Everything will be fine'. Do you children should be shielded from certain topics? How easy do you find talking about death?
- What was your response to the Monster's stories? Do they have a clear meaning? How are they similar/different to Jesus' parables?
- In the film, stories and art allow Conor and his mum to explore truths about life and meaning. Is there an art/medium/hobby that allows you to do the same?
- Who/what do you think the Monster represents? In his review, Stacey Tuttle, of The Shepherd Project – a Christian para-church organisation – says: 'The monster ... symbolizes God ... for all his harshness, he is also incredibly tender. He gives Conor the ability and freedom to forgive himself. He comforts Connor in grief. He heals. He provides hope.' What do you think of this interpretation of the Monster?
- In one scene, Conor asks the Monster: 'What do I do?'
Monster: 'What you did just now. You speak the truth.'
Conor: 'That's all?'
Monster: 'You think it's easy? You were willing to die rather than speak it!'
Have there been times in your life when speaking the truth felt difficult/liberating? Do you think speaking the truth always sets you free?
- What was your response to the film's ending? What did you take it to mean?
- Where is good news to be found in the film?

Films critiquing the Church

***Philomena* (12)**

Storyline: A political journalist helps a woman search for her son, who was taken away from her decades ago after she became pregnant and was forced to live in a convent.

- ‘Some of the nuns were very nice,’ says Philomena to her daughter and Martin (the journalist). Did you consider Philomena’s ability to see the good in people and situations as hopeful/naive/loving/a coping mechanism or other?
- Considering the actions of the nuns, should we be surprised that many people today are suspicious or even hostile towards the Church? Should this affect the way we spread the Good News?
- Philomena’s father sent her away and told everyone she was dead. Which groups does society try to shut off/exclude/deny today?
- ‘Why would God bestow on us a sexual desire which he then wants us to resist? Is it some weird game that he’s invented to alleviate the boredom of being omnipotent?’ How would you respond to Martin’s question?
- Of the mothers buried in the cemetery, Sister Hildegard says: ‘Their suffering was atonement for their sins.’ Do you think suffering can be an atonement for sin? What does the Bible say about this?
- The normally placid and generous Philomena becomes animated and vexed when talking about *The Slipper and the Horseshoe* – a 1970’s British musical film retelling the classic fairytale *Cinderella*. Do stories (on the page or screen) enable us to empathize/get impassioned/see injustices in ways that our own life story sometimes doesn’t?
- Where is good news to be found in the film?

***Saved!* (12)**

Storyline: When a girl attending a Christian high school becomes pregnant, she finds herself demonised and ostracised as her former friends turn on her.

- What do you think about the portrayal of faith and/or Christianity in the film?
- What is your experience of, and attitude towards, faith schools?
- The worship service at the school involves contemporary music, flashing lights and a somersaulting pastor. Is this what is needed to make the church attractive to young people today?

- One character prays: 'I know I'm not supposed to ask for specifics, Lord ... but I want this to be the best year ever. And between you and me ... I think you'll agree I totally deserve it.' Do you think that God's response to our prayers is dependent upon our actions?
- The Christian Jewels try to perform an exorcism in their attempts to save Mary's soul, claiming that she is 'backsliding into the flames of hell'. What has informed your beliefs about hell, whatever they may be?
- Could the film be seen to reflect/reinterpret any passages from the Bible?
- 'Mercy House doesn't really exist for the people who get sent there. It exists more for the people who do the sending.' What do you think about this assessment of Mercy House?
- One character says: 'I mean, really, when you think about it, what would Jesus do? I don't know but in the meantime, we'll be trying to figure it out together.' Is this a fair summary of the task of the Church today?
- Where is good news to be found in the film?

Is your favourite film not covered above? Why not add to this resource by including small group questions for a film you love?!

Credit: © Phil Wall for film questions