



Film in church: Education, entertainment and outreach

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As with so much fine cinema, our story starts with a bold statement. It is a statement from the Rev Peter Neilson, that imaginative thinker within the Church of Scotland. Back in 1999, in the vestry of St Cuthbert's Parish Church, Edinburgh, Peter voiced an idea which ran something like this: *The place in public life in Scotland today which offers people a forum for considering spiritual and ethical issues is the cinema. It's not the church. It's the cinema. That's where people choose to go if they want to engage with deep questions in our time.*

From that moment on, I started seeing cinema in a fresh, new light. A trip to the pictures had always been about being entertained, inspired and challenged by stories set before us, yet perhaps those same stories could have the power to reach out to the cinema-going public and grip them on spiritual and ethical levels, encouraging viewers to be moved in ways which had once been the domain of the well-attended place of worship.

That conversation with Peter took place while I was a student attached to St Cuthbert's, and the very first thing I did was to put his thinking to the test. Next day, I took my clipboard into New College, and I sent round my classmates a sign-up sheet for a cinema visit. Some ten or eleven students did indeed sign up, so the following week, we trooped along to our local multiplex and we sat in the warm and comfortable darkness, in the company of Peter Neilson. Afterwards, we all gathered in a nearby bar and invited Peter to lead our discussions.

To be honest, the documentary we discussed proved to be nothing special as cinema goes yet, despite this, we were still able to latch

on to certain key topics raised in the film: quest, courage, jeopardy, community. By the end of the evening, our small group of budding thinkers had first thought through and then exchanged within the group some engaging ideas which were able to offer us a pretty direct route into the world of theology. After that night in 1999, our studies took over for the next three years, and we never made it back to the multiplex, but a seed had been planted in my mind. Surely it's obvious in this visual age, with extremely high quality cinema all around us, that the church should find common cause with the film-maker. Not necessarily in identifying films which are overtly theological or biblical in their basis, but rather in tracking down films which speak to people inside the church and outside it too, raising and addressing the kinds of issues which we all face in our journeys through life.

Let's pause for a moment to consider some films from over the years which might feed into spiritual discussions involving church members and others beyond our congregations. My apologies are offered here on several counts. In selecting ten films, I have of necessity excluded 10,000 and more. Also, I'm very well aware of what a male-dominated list of directors I am presenting in my list. This may say something about me, and I am sure it says something about the film industry. Lastly, I'm sorry that most of the films here are from the last twenty years or so. There would be so many riches to be mined across a far broader time frame.

Here, along with the shortest of commentaries, is a little set of largely well-loved, mainstream films which might be an asset to any church seeking to use film:

12 Angry Men (Sidney Lumet, 1957)

Many people's favourite. A film about doubt, burden of proof, and the struggle of liberal values against the closed mindedness of the herd mentality.

A Room with a View (James Ivory, 1985)

Edwardian glory. A film about muddle and the victory of the truth of love over the vice-like grip of conformity.

Witness (Peter Weir, 1985)

A police officer with the Amish. Observe the power of solidarity when an unconventional community is pitted against a murderer.

The Iron Giant (Brad Bird, 1999)

Deep theology in a children's cartoon. Not known by many, yet loved to bits by its loyal band of supporters, of whom I am one.

Paper Clips (Elliot Berlin and Joe Fab, 2004)

How do you come to terms with the sheer scale of six million Jewish people murdered in the Holocaust? By collecting six million paperclips.

Amazing Grace (Michael Apted, 2006)

Watch as that ludicrous abolitionist, William Wilberforce makes a fool of himself over many years, and ends up getting slavery outlawed.

Pray the Devil Back to Hell (Virginia Reticker, 2008)

A documentary of breath-taking power. As Liberia's Christian and Muslim women take on a tyrant, something big is in the offing.

The Way (Emilio Estevez, 2010)

An ideal Holy Week discussion starter. Martin Sheen walks the Camino, on a quest for meaning behind the death of his son ... played by the actor's son.

Marvellous (Julian Farino, 2014)

Worthy of its title, this is part drama, part biopic, depicting the life and faith of Neil Baldwin, whose noble dreams become reality.

Paddington (Paul King, 2014)

Surely a challenge to us all. An estranged illegal immigrant in the big city causes havoc yet finds true compassion and acceptance.

So hopefully we can see that some of life's biggest issues are laid out for us, there in the cinema:

- passion for justice and openness of opinion
- muddle and clarity
- solidarity and courage
- sacrifice and salvation
- horror and compassion
- hope and perseverance
- common vision and cooperation
- loss and longing
- ambitious dreams and towering achievement
- humanity, community and a Peruvian bear.

Cinema can give us all of this and more, in little ninety-minute batches. Can the church honestly compete with such artistry and communicative skill? This much is clear: the church can – and should – put cinema to good use.

In writing this paper I was asked to take on a practical theology role which focuses much more on the word ‘practical’ than it does on the word ‘theology’. So, having paved the way for a decent discussion on the merits of all these first-rate films, I am now going to turn my back on that prospect, and focus not on what the church can do, but on how the church can do it. And so we transport ourselves to that most fabulous of all Scottish counties: East Lothian.

Having been ordained in 2004, I quickly found that one of congregations in my charge, Longniddry Parish Church, was desperate to do something new with its church building. So, in 2006, we gutted the place and made plans for an new complex which we trusted might better meet the needs of both our congregation and community. While we were in the initial planning stages, a thought occurred to me: our village finds itself miles away from the nearest cinema, so why not decide that we would make cinema available to our neighbourhood, through the church. And so, Longniddry Film Club sailed over the horizon in our general direction. Our building was made warm and comfortable, and, with the installation of a high quality laser projector and a DVD player, the place was made ready to take on an additional new role.

Our thinking was as follows: by screening films on, say, a monthly basis, we could offer some thought-provoking titles (whether the

latest Hollywood DVD releases, obscure art house productions, or maybe some totally overlooked gems) which might spark some decent discussions over a post-screening cup of coffee served, inevitably, with a suitably Presbyterian biscuit. It was a very exciting prospect – the film club, that is, not the Presbyterian biscuit – and one which our kirk session was happy to allow me to take forward.

We set to, trying to find out how we could make this work, within a wide variety of potentially mind-numbing restrictions (not least, the requirements and limitations of Scots Law). Our first call was to the Church of Scotland's solicitor, who found out for us what was needed in order for us to comply with state regulation. At first sight it seemed quite a complex process. To set up a church film club, we would need to buy ourselves a Public Video Screening Licence (PVSL) which we did via a company called Filmbank, which helpfully guided us in the right direction. We would also need to call in our local authority so that they would be informed of our plans. In addition, we had to get music-related paperwork sorted with the Performing Rights Society and even drag in the Fire Brigade to inspect our premises.

Why the Fire Brigade? The reasoning, it seems, flows back to a historic tragedy in 1929 at Paisley's Glen Cinema, where the spontaneous combustion of film stock made of cellulose nitrate resulted in a cinema fire which killed 71 people, all but two of whom were children. This resulted in an amendment to the Cinematograph Act 1909, making the screening of films in public places an activity requiring some very stringent regulation. Even today, in our DVD and Blu-ray world, it seems that the same concerns over public screenings apply. Cellulose nitrate has long since gone, though – thankfully – public safety stays high on our nation's agenda.

For us, none of these procedures proved to be difficult, though they were time-consuming and bureaucratic. Once the administrative hoops had been jumped through, we were ready to launch Longniddry Film Club. In the winter of 2007, we screened our first film, the aforementioned Benedict Cumberbatch biopic about William Wilberforce, *Amazing Grace*. This was a good choice, as it coincided with the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in the UK. The timing of the film's release and our subsequent screening of it proved perfect, and the showing of the DVD did a lot to promote

discussion of slavery, both in days gone by and also in our own time.

In the months which followed, we found some excellent movies, some of which were very obscure indeed, yet which expanded our horizons in all sorts of directions. I have already made reference to a moving documentary which touched many people. This was *Paperclips*, the story of a junior high school in rural Tennessee, whose young students decided to get a sense of the Holocaust's scale by collecting six million paperclips (roughly one for each Jewish life taken by the Nazis) and setting up a permanent exhibition in their school yard.

Films like this are like gold dust: they are unknown; they are inspirational; and they have a quirky, almost home-spun quality to them. They are also direct and challenging, leaving an audience thinking and perhaps even asking: 'If young children can achieve such a remarkable feat in Tennessee, what might we do, here in our own community?' There is no doubt that film has the power to educate and to inspire, but at the same time it can (and should) also entertain. One of the most engaging films which we have shown is another one from my list: Emilio Estevez's *The Way*, about a grieving father's pilgrimage along the Camino, as he mourns the death of his son. There is so much spiritual food for thought in this film, and yet it is also tremendously charming and engaging, showing that we don't need to make our congregations sit with furrowed brows, nodding sagely at theological points being presented intellectually on screen. There are all sorts of films that can inform, educate and entertain, without luring us into some earnest Reithian trap.

Over the last eight years, we have had great fun pushing at the boundaries. We have staged one world premiere and we have hosted the European premiere of a film from California, when to our delight we learned that we would be joined by the American film-makers on the night. Of course, what makes a film club possible in the most simple of senses is having the high tech kit already set up in your church building. And if you make that necessary equipment part of your building's fabric, it actually opens up all sorts of avenues for you.

Since launching our film club, we have also been able to use our facilities for adult education groups, with lecture series on DVD by New Testament scholar, Professor Larry Hurtado. We have found

tremendous value in working through the back catalogue of the *Living the Questions* theology courses, which are outstanding. For us, these courses are run as part of our ‘Breakfast Theology Club’, when our members turn up at 8.45 on a Saturday morning for freshly brewed coffee and nicely warmed pastries before settling down to the many and varied joys of (among many others) Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. We have also been able to bring film into our services on a Sunday morning, as with Rob Bell’s very thoughtful series of 24 short films under the title, *Nooma*.

In terms of education and worship, our facilities have allowed us to go far beyond our initial film club intentions, to the advantage of our congregation and wider community.

There is one further area which I need to mention before drawing to a close – that of outreach.

In the wake of the funeral of a much-loved church member who had worked in military intelligence during the Second World War, I realised that many stories were being lost with the passing of so many older people. Our congregations were inspired to do something about this, and launched an ambitious oral history project in which men and women, typically in their eighties and nineties, simply told their stories, which were recorded, transcribed and in due course published in pamphlet form. Some time later, I took a copy of the publication to the film-making club of Preston Lodge High School in nearby Prestonpans, where I was proud to be both a school chaplain and a school dad. There I worked with a small group of fifteen-year-olds, who set out on a project of their own, for their SQA English qualifications. Under the supervision of a highly gifted English teacher, Louise Marr, the young film-makers worked with members and elders of my two congregations, to create a documentary entitled *War: The Underestimated People*, which told their powerful stories in their own words.

Here’s what Catherine M. Barsotti and Robert K. Johnston, authors of the book *Finding God in the Movies* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2004), have to say about stories:

Everyone loves a good story. It’s universal. When effective, stories touch us as whole people – our minds, our hearts, even

our “guts.” By providing us connection with others, they paradoxically remind us of ourselves. [...] Like stories more generally, a good movie helps us make sense of the world even as it provides a temporary respite from it. As we watch even the simplest and most commonplace of movies, we are presented with options concerning life. [...] By focusing reality for the viewer, a movie provides us metaphors for understanding life. One of our seminary colleagues, Mark Burrows, has pointed out that in modern Greek cities, the word for mass transportation vehicles – whether buses, trams, or trains – is *metaphorai*. That is to say, one takes a “metaphor” if one wants to get from one place to another. By telling their stories, movies give us a “ride,” they fill us with the dreams, hopes, and fears of others, enabling us to move from here to there. (Pp. 16–17)

The DVD, the result of the film project, has a rare communicative power. By putting teenagers together with very elderly people, a really fine piece of work was able to emerge: a dialogue between young and old; a dialogue between church members and the youngsters of the local community. In all of this, there is one word which above all needs to be borne in mind. It is a word which takes us back to the start of this paper. That word, of course, is ‘story’.