

## Some thoughts on watching films

Stories are the stuff of life. They allow us to reflect on all sorts of issues at a safe distance as we engage with the characters, cry with them, laugh with them, get cross with them and generally share their experience. How they deal with the issues they come across may frustrate us, or give us new insights; cause us to laugh or cry; result in us hurling abuse at the screen or willing there to be a happy ending. And through it all we can encounter God in all sorts of unexpected places if only we take time to look.

### Questions to ask yourself

- ▶ What did you think of the film? What do you like most? Least?
- ▶ Which incidents made you think or feel most strongly? How well did you think the film treated those incidents?
- ▶ What issues did the film raise for you?
- ▶ What character(s) do you most identify with and why?
- ▶ Does the film have any echoes of Christian beliefs or stories from the Bible? Does it support or challenge Christian values?

### Some facts about the film

- ▶ The tree where Solomon sees several men being lynched was actually used for that purpose and is surrounded by the graves of murdered slaves.
- ▶ Before filming their more brutal scenes together, Lupita Nyong'o (Patsey) and Michael Fassbender (Edwin Epps) performed a ritual of "making nice". According to Nyong'o: "We wouldn't say anything to each other, just a look in the eye and a grasping of hands. Our characters are in such opposition, but we as actors needed each other in order to be able to go the distance."
- ▶ The film is the first from a black director to win an Oscar for Best Picture.
- ▶ Michael K. Williams (Robert) had an emotional breakdown while filming what eventually became a deleted scene in the movie. The stress of recreating such painful material caused him to collapse to the ground after a take, where he screamed and cried for an extended period as one of the stunt coordinators comforted him.
- ▶ In the movie, Ford purchased Solomon and Eliza for \$1000 and \$700 respectively. Calculating inflation between 1841 and 2014, the equivalent dollar amount would be \$27,000 and \$19,000 respectively.
- ▶ Following his experiences, Solomon Northrup wrote a book on which the film is based. He lived another ten years or so and died in or around 1863.

ELL AND THE BUTTERFLY EDWARD SCISSORHANDS JUNO THE KITE RUNNER SON OF RAMBO



**A chance to watch films together.  
An opportunity to discuss the issues raised.  
A time of friendship, food and fun.**

1st Jun	Gravity
6th Jul	Ruby Sparks
3rd Aug	Hedd Wyn
7th Sep	<u>12 Years A Slave</u>
5th Oct	Jimmy's Hall
2nd Nov	The Railway Man

**Films start at 5:30pm  
Followed by food, coffee and conversation**

**10 Bletchingdon Road  
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## 12 Years A Slave

*12 Years A Slave* is based on an incredible true story of one man's fight for survival and freedom. In 1841, still twenty years before the American Civil War, Solomon Northup, a free black man from upstate New York, is abducted and sold into slavery. Facing cruelty (personified by a malevolent slave owner, portrayed by Michael Fassbender), as well as unexpected kindnesses, Solomon struggles not only to stay alive, but to retain his dignity. After twelve horrific years, Solomon's chance meeting with a Canadian abolitionist alters his life forever.

Throughout the film, every character that Solomon comes into contact with embodies something about the spectrum of the human condition. There is benevolence. There is inner turmoil and ruthlessness. There is love. And, within Solomon, there is always this refusal to give in to adversity. As such, it is a story about hope, about not giving in and about always believing that you can overcome.

The film won three Oscars - Best Picture, Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role (Lupita Nyong'o who plays Patsey) and Best Adapted Screenplay. It also won a BAFTA for Chiwetel Ejiofor as Best Leading Actor.

### Masking our identity

Time and again, Solomon is told to forget who he is in order to survive and to hide his true identity, particularly the fact that he is well educated. What effect do you think this pretence has on Solomon, and why? Where does our own sense of personal identity come from? And what happens when it's threatened or taken away from us? Is it right to hide the "real you" to survive? Or should we be open about who we are, whatever the consequences? How honest are you about the "real you" to those around you?

### Compromise

How do you respond to the character of William Ford? Caught between the accepted behaviour of the time and his desire to treat others well, how well do you think he manages? Should he have taken a stronger stand on behalf of his slaves? Or is it a case of one's hands being tied by the social mores of the time? How well do you deal with situations of compromise and complicity?

### The causes of cruelty

*"Fassbender plays Epps as someone who is suffering within himself, who considers the world to be kind of against him, and tries to right that by lashing out at the things that he thinks he owns."* (Chiwetel Ejiofor). What do you think of Chiwetel's observation? Do you think we ought to have any sympathy for Epps?

### Universal truth

*"Laws change. Universal truths are constant."* (Bass) Do you agree? And, if so, where do such universal truths come from? How do we agree on what they are?

### Redemption

Blaise Pascal said that *"There is in mankind some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness."* How do you think this quote relates to the film? And what do you make of it as an assessment of human nature and the human condition. What moments of redemption did you see in the film?

*Reflections based on material from the Damaris Trust*

## Memorable Quotes

**Solomon:** I don't want to survive. I want to live.

**Bass:** The law says you have the right to hold a nigger, but begging the law's pardon... it lies. Is everything right because the law allows it? Suppose they'd pass a law taking away your liberty and making you a slave?

**Epps:** That ain't a supposable case.

**Bass:** Because the law states that your liberties are undeniable? Because society deems it so? Laws change. Social systems crumble. Universal truths are constant. It is a fact, it is a plain fact that what is true and right is true and right for all. White and black alike.

**Solomon:** *[Epps has just whipped Patsey to within an inch of her life]* Thou devil! Sooner or later, somewhere in the course of eternal justice thou shalt answer for this sin!

**Epps:** Sin? There is no sin. A man does how he pleases with his property.

**Solomon:** I did as instructed. If there's something wrong, then it's wrong with your instructions.

**Clemens:** If you want to survive, do and say as little as possible. Tell no one who you really are and tell no one that you can read and write. Unless you want to be a dead nigger.

**Epps:** "And that servant which knew his Lord's will and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes..." D'ye hear that? "Stripes." That nigger that don't take care, that don't obey his lord - that's his master - d'ye see? - that 'ere nigger shall be beaten with many stripes. Now, "many" signifies a great many. Forty, a hundred, a hundred and fifty lashes... That's Scriptor!

## What really happened?

Much of the film is true. In fact, the real Edwin Epps was probably crueler than portrayed. In addition to his "dancing moods", when he would force his exhausted slaves to dance, in real life Epps also had "whipping moods", usually when he was drunk, in which he would drive the slaves around the yard and whip them for fun. William Ford, though, is portrayed as something of a hypocrite whereas, in his book, Solomon has nothing but words of the utmost kindness for his former master. "There never was a more kind, Christian man than William Ford. The influences and associations that had always surrounded him blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of slavery. Yet he was a model master. Were all men such as he, slavery would be deprived of more than half its bitterness."

Following his release, much effort was put into trying to bring his kidnappers to justice but, although two men were arrested, after much legal wrangling, the case was dropped. What happened to Solomon remains unclear. There are reports of angry mobs disrupting speeches he gave at abolitionist rallies and this could have led to his murder. Others conjecture he was kidnapped again, or that his two former kidnappers tracked him down and killed him. No grave has ever been found and his wife, in the 1875 New York State Census, is registered as "widowed".