

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 we only 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 scene where Sister Helen was pulled over is based on an incident that happened to Helen Prejean during filming. She thought it was so funny that she asked to have it put into the film.
- The real Sister Helen appears outside the prison during a candlelight vigil scene.
- When director Tim Robbins needed songs written for the film, he simply sent a cut of the film to several noted composers, among them Bruce Springsteen and Steve Earle and asked for a song.
- Because Peter Sarsgaard and Missy Yager's brutal rape scene was filmed in the mud, every time they did a new take they had to get up, get showered, get dressed, put new makeup on and do it again. It took all night to film.
- In reality, Elmo Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie, both inmates upon whom Sean Penn's character Matthew Poncelet is based, were executed by the electric chair in Louisiana in 1984. By 1993, Louisiana switched that penalty to lethal injection as the most humane way to execute. Both Tim Robbins and Helen Prejean decided to use lethal injection in the film instead of the electric chair because they didn't want people using a 'more humane death' as a moral opt out and saying: 'Oh well, we used to do electrocution but that's too barbaric so now we are humane and inject them'.
- In reality, the chemicals used in lethal injections in Louisiana are administered manually, not by a machine as in the movie.
- Filming is never perfect. When Sister Helen is talking with Hilton Barber outside the court house just after the first clemency hearing, he calls her "Susan" (the actor's real name) instead of "Helen".



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

30th Mar	The Queen
27th Apr	The Simpsons Movie
1st Jun	Shooting Dogs
3rd Aug	The Pursuit of Happyness
7th Sep	<u>Dead Man Walking</u>
5th Oct	This is England

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

**10 Bletchingdon Road
Islip**

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Dead Man Walking

Dead Man Walking tells the story of Matthew Poncelet, a convicted murderer on death row, and his relationship with a Catholic nun working in the slums of New Orleans who, in response to a letter asking for help, befriends him and helps him appeal against his sentence. As time runs out, Sister Helen tries to walk alongside him, encouraging him to take responsibility for what he has done and find God's forgiveness. In so doing, she struggles with the responses of those around her, particularly those of the families of the two murder victims who cannot understand how anyone could want to spend time with "the monster" that killed their children.

The film is based on the real-life experiences of Sister Helen Prejean, though the story itself is fictional, and raises a variety of issues, including those of revenge, forgiveness, taking responsibility, love, and whether the death penalty can ever be justified.

The truth will set you free

At the beginning, Matthew Poncelet insists on his innocence, but it soon becomes clear that he is responsible, at least in some way, for what happened. Sister Helen tries to get him to face up to this, challenging him with the words "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). And it is not until he actually does acknowledge his role in what happened that he is able to find some inner peace and regain his dignity before God. Acknowledging the truth can be hard for us all, yet if we are truly to take God's forgiveness on board we have to be honest and face up to the truth. Just like lancing a boil, it can be painful but it is the only way the pus can escape and healing can take place. How good are you at being honest with yourself? With God?

The face of love

Practising the love of God is tough. For Christian love is not a "nice" sort of love which seeks to live and let live, and where the aim is to do nothing that will particularly upset anyone else. Instead, it is a real love for real people. And it is a love which reaches out to all, whoever they are. Everyone, whatever they have done, is a child of God, loved by him, accepted for who they are. Such love doesn't just happen. "It is work" says Sister Helen. It is an act of will. Yet when we reach out in that way, we become the "face of love" for others, enabling them to catch a glimpse of God for themselves. How good are you at seeing others through God's eyes? At seeing yourself through God's eyes? What about those who see things differently and are hurt by your actions? How do you show God's love to them, too?

The cost of forgiveness

There is much in the Bible about forgiveness and reconciliation (eg. Matthew 6:12; 18:22; Luke 15) but what does it take to forgive? How easy do you think you would find it to forgive someone who brutally murdered your child? Both Matthew and the victims' parents need to find healing through acknowledging what has happened and being enabled to let go. Sister Helen helps Matthew through that process. How might the parents have been helped on their journey?

The consequences of our actions

Several characters in the film talk of "an eye for an eye". Forgiveness doesn't remove the need for justice. We have to face up to the consequences of our actions—and that might mean death. Is taking a life ever justified? Does it matter who does it?

How do you say goodbye?

For some, life is taken away by others. For some, life is taken away by illness and disease. Both involve loved ones saying goodbye to each other. What would you say to your son, daughter, brother, sister, mother, father, or other loved one, if you knew tonight would be the last time you would see them?

Memorable quotes

- Chaplain** So what is it, sister? Morbid fascination? Bleedin' heart sympathy?
Sister Helen He wrote me and asked me to come. So I came.
- Sister Helen** Show me some respect, Matthew.
Matthew Why? 'Cause you're a nun?
Sister Helen Because I'm a person.
- Matthew** You don't find no one rich on death row.
- Hilton Barber** It's easy to kill a monster. It's hard to kill a human being.
- Prison guard** Tell me something sister, what is nun doing in a place like this. Shouldn't you be teaching children? Didn't you know what this man has done? How he killed them kids?
Sister Helen What he was involved with was evil. I don't condone it. I just don't see the sense of killing people to say that killing people's wrong.
Prison guard You know what the Bible say, 'An eye for an eye'.
Sister Helen You know what else the Bible ask for death as a punishment? For adultery, prostitution, homosexuality, trespass upon sacred grounds, profaning the sabbath and contempt of parents.
- Clyde Percy** How can you stand next to him?
Sister Helen Mr. Percy, I'm just trying to follow the example of Jesus, who said that every person is worth more than their worst act.
Clyde Percy This is not a person. This is an animal. ... Matthew Poncelet is God's mistake.
- Sister Helen** You are a son of God, Matthew Poncelet.
Matthew [*in tears*] Thank you. I've never been called a son of God before. [*laughs slightly*] I've been called a son of a you-know-what plenty of times, but I've never been called a son of God.
- State trooper** I never gave a ticket to a nun before. I gave a ticket to a guy from the IRS one time. Got audited the next year. I'll tell you what, this time I'll let this one slide, but keep your speed down, yeah?
- Chaplain** You can save this guy by getting him to receive the sacraments of the Church before he dies. That's your job. Nothing more, nothing less.
- Matthew** Only three days left. Plenty of time to read my Bible and look for a loophole.
- Sister Helen** I want the last face you see in this world to be the face of love, so you look at me when they do this thing. I'll be the face of love for you.
- Matthew** I just wanna say I think killin' is wrong, no matter who does it, whether it's me or y'all or your government.
- Earl Delacroix** My wife filed for divorce this afternoon. We just have different ways of coping with our son's death. "Until death do us part."
- Earl Delacroix** I've got a lot of hate. I don't have your faith.
Sister Helen Oh, it's not faith. I wish it were that easy. It's work.
- Matthew** Thank you for loving me.