

## 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 film was given an 18 certificate by the BBFC due to its racist language and incidence of violence. However, some councils such as Bristol, Camden and Westminster have chosen to overturn this, feeling the film should more widely reach its target audience of teenagers.
- Thomas ("Tommo") Turgoose, who plays Shaun, was 13 at the time of filming. Turgoose had never acted before, had been banned from his school play for bad behaviour, and demanded £5 travel expenses to turn up for the film's auditions. He was also only attending school for one hour a week and had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder. However, the director (Shane Meadows) was convinced he had found just what he was looking for. The film was dedicated to Turgoose's mother, Sharon, who died of cancer on 29 December 2005. She never got to see the film, although she saw a short preview.
- The original skinheads hailed from the late sixties. It began with Mods who were welcomed into the world of reggae clubs in London. Here they discovered not only Ska music but also the key style components that defined the skinhead look. The skinhead culture was taken up by both black and white working class kids who bonded over a love of reggae and a particular kind of English identity, with braces, suits, boots and heads shaved, military style. The second wave of skinheads, in the early eighties, were in one sense similar: just kids from council estates finding their place by being different together. Allegiance was now sworn to bands that acknowledged the heritage of Ska. They were teenagers from areas of high unemployment looking for solidarity beyond Thatcher's "me" culture. They were abandoned by society and that made them vulnerable to approaches from the National Front.



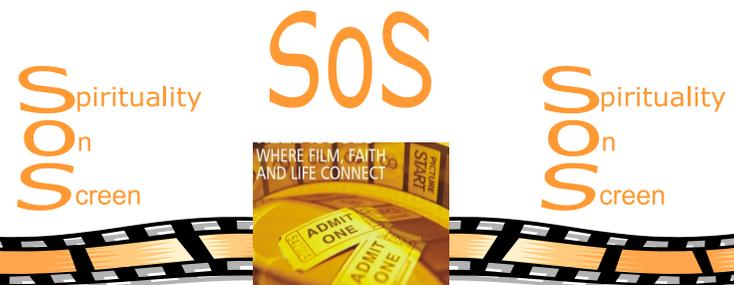
**A chance to watch films together.  
An opportunity to discuss the issues raised.  
A time of friendship, food and fun.**

<b>5th Oct</b>	<b><u>This is England</u></b>
<b>2nd Nov</b>	<b>The Diving Bell &amp; The Butterfly</b>
<b>7th Dec</b>	<b>Edward Scissorhands</b>
<b>4th Jan</b>	<b>Juno</b>
<b>1st Feb</b>	<b>The Kite Runner</b>
<b>1st Mar</b>	<b>WALL-E</b>

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

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## This is England

Set in 1983, *This is England* tells the story of Shaun, a 12 year old boy growing up with this mum in a grim, coastal town, his dad having been killed fighting in the Falklands War. On his way home from school, where he's been tormented all day for wearing flares, he runs into a group of skinheads who, against expectations, turn out to be friendly and take him under their wing. Soon Shaun discovers parties, girls and snappy dressing, and finds some role models in Woody, Milky and the rest of the gang. But when an older, overtly racist skinhead returns home from prison, the easy camaraderie of the group is broken, and Shaun is drawn into much more uncomfortable territory. The film is based largely on the director's own experience as a youngster. Handling the complexities of masculinity, violence and race with sensitivity and a lightness of touch, the film successfully captures the mood of the time and provides valuable insights into what it means to be part of a gang.

### **Community**

Shaun is an outsider with few friends until Woody and his friends take him in. As part of Woody's gang he begins to find a sense of self-identity and a feeling that he belongs. Nonetheless, his joining the gang upsets the dynamics that were already there. When Combo appears on the scene, the tensions within the gang become more extreme and the group splits. What does it mean to you to "belong"? What groups do you belong to? How are you made welcome and how do you extend that welcome to others? What about church? How willing are we to let in others who might "rock the boat"? Is there a case for excluding someone for the sake of the group as a whole? What does it really mean to say God's love is for all?

### **The danger of stereotypes**

Think for a moment of your initial reaction when you saw Woody. What did you first think about Combo? How did your reactions and sympathies for both those characters change as the film went on? Youths, gangs, skinheads, the National Front—all such terms carry a certain amount of baggage. Sometimes people with such labels act in the way we expect, but sometimes they don't. In reality, whatever label someone wears, they remain a person, as complex as you or I. Our challenge is always to see them as people; to see them as God sees them, with all their ambiguities—someone who is loved by God and precious in his sight.

### **The power of persuasion**

The man from the National Front soon appears to have everyone on his side. Using the right words and images, connecting with people's concerns and giving them what they want to hear can be very persuasive. So can being part of a group. How much do you think people's acceptance of his ideas was due to his arguments and how much was due to wanting to remain part of the group? Are we sometimes reluctant to disagree with those around us? Was the NF man guilty of brainwashing? Or is that just a convenient label we use for people whose views we find extreme? How do we enable proper debate within the church, allowing people the space to talk over their ideas without giving the impression that "anything goes"?

### **Standing up for others**

At one point, Combo has a go at Woody and the others for not standing up for Milky when Combo was using racist language. Similarly, Combo praises Shaun for standing up for his Dad. How often do we fail to stand up for others around us? It is often easier to keep quiet and go along with the group as a whole but that is what bullies rely on. Do we have the confidence to stand up for others? Do we have the confidence to stand up for God?

### **Changing perspectives**

Having been friends with Milky, Combo suddenly begins to see him in a different way. What do you think triggers that change? Is it racially motivated or simply jealousy over a happy family background? What things cause individuals, groups, nations to shift from seeing others as people to seeing them as something else—objects, enemies, problems, numbers? How do we

guard against this?

### **Pride in our heritage**

Is it possible to express pride in being English without sounding racist?

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## Relating it to scripture

### **Psalm 11 — Corruption and violence**

The psalmist discusses two groups of people, the righteous and those who love violence. Can any of the film's characters be easily fitted into the psalmist's two categories? Or are things more complicated than that? If so, in what way?

### **Matthew 5: 43-48 & Luke 6: 27-36 — Loving our enemies**

Jesus often encourages his listeners to adopt a more loving approach to their enemies, challenging the more usual response of "love your neighbour and hate your enemy". In Luke 7:1-10 he is to be found healing the servant of a Roman centurion, a representative of the hated occupying power. That call to love one's enemies remains firmly embedded in Christian teaching. Yet it is much easier to say than to do. How would you have responded to some of the characters and situations in the film? For example, what would you have done had you been in the shop when Shaun entered on that second occasion? And how would you have responded when Combo entered?

### **Matthew 18: 1-10 — The treatment of little children**

Asked by his disciples about the pecking order in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus responds by talking about little children and has much to say about the care, treatment and manipulation of young people. How does this relate to what happens to Shaun and the influences other characters bring to bear on him?

### **Acts 2: 42-47 — Community and the early church**

The practices and behaviour of the early church as a group provide a model for community living that still challenges us today. Selling possessions and giving the proceeds to the needy seems a long way from consumerism; meeting together to eat in one another's homes seems a long way from individualism. In different ways, such activities meet people's needs on deep and practical levels.

- In the film, Shaun's experience of community comes through his association with two gangs. How do you think those gangs resemble the communities of the early church? In what ways are they different?
- Meanwhile, Combo is perhaps the most complex character in the film. What do you think about his needs? Are they being met? How might the early church have met his needs? How might his needs be met today?
- To what extent do our own experiences of church/community reflect the community which was the early church?

### **1 Corinthians 9:20-23 — Appearing to people as a member of their culture**

Paul discusses how he preaches the gospel by appearing to the Jews as a Jew, to those under the law as one under the law, and so on. In the context of this story, we might want to add "by appearing as a skinhead to skinheads". But how do we do that without coming across as false? How successful are we at understanding different cultures from our own so as to effectively communicate with them? How much is this a two-way process? And how do we deal with sub-cultures which seem to be totally at odds with the gospel (eg. the National Front)?