

The Green Mile

(MA 15+ for violence, sexual references, adult themes)

Hollywood Jesus: http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/green_mile.htm

IMDB: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0120689/>

Directed by

Frank Darabont

Writing credits (WGA)

Stephen King (novel)

Frank Darabont (screenplay)

Cast overview, first billed only:

Tom Hanks

David Morse

Bonnie Hunt

Michael Clarke Duncan

James Cromwell

Michael Jeter

Graham Greene

Runtime: 188 min

Country: USA

Language: English / French

Color: Color (Technicolor)

Synopsis

The film explores the relationship between Paul Edgecomb (Tom Hanks), a prison guard on Death Row (E block) at Cold Mountain Penitentiary, and a prisoner John Coffey (Michael Clark Duncan). The film is based on a six part serialised story by Stephen King (1995). The story deals with trust, love, compassion, and miracles that happen in the most unexpected places by the most unexpected people (contrary to the efficient 'marketing of miracles' by some telly evangelists and as depicted so well in the Steve Martin movie, 'Leap of Faith'). It's also about the harsh reality of life in the 1930's Depression era and on Death Row – with beatings, cruelty, psychic pain, executions, murders, and vengeance. And in the midst of this reality, the film is also about encountering the transcendent in the ordinary circumstances of life, and its impact on the lives of people.

It's a great vehicle for prompting discussions about faith! There's so much to discuss! This discussion sheet gives focus to some questions but each section will give rise to new questions!

(It's a long film (3 hours), so don't go to a late session if you want to include discussion).

John Coffey and Jesus Christ

John Coffey is a prisoner on Death Row, falsely accused of the brutal murders of two nine year old sisters. He is found at the scene of the crime with the two girls cradled in his lap, their blood stained heads cupped in his huge hands. He is truly distraught and weeps as he says, "I tried to take it back", which sounds like a confession to those present – the sheriff, the father and the men who have been hunting the killer. However, we understand the significance of the statement when he brings back the mouse to life. John is a huge man, with scars that indicate his experience of suffering. Yet he has a gentle and meek demeanor. He is a Jesus figure in the film, able to perform healings, bring the dead back to life, bring hope in the direst of circumstances, sense/feel the pain of others, see evil/goodness in the heart of another, and discern knowledge about others. Even though he is a man condemned to death, he is willing and able to help others. The two other men executed are guilty of crimes (cf the two thieves with Jesus at Calvary) but John is an innocent, led to his execution by state authorities. When he is executed he is subjected to the taunts and jeers of those present ('hope you die twice') and is comforted by the small circle of 'friends' (the guards). At the end of the film, one wonders why such a gentle man had to be executed in such a brutal fashion Why did he have to die when he was blameless, to take the place of the one who was guilty? Again, a great entry point into why Jesus was crucified (systemic, political, spiritual dimensions).

- Discuss the parallels between John Coffey and Jesus Christ.

- (Recall Gospel stories; Paul's writings about people becoming Christ-like; Isaiah 53: 2-12).

John Coffey and the guards (Jesus and the disciples/apostles)

There is no doubt that John had a profound impact on the guards. We know little about John's life – only his affect on the guards during the time span of the film. We are not aware of if or in what ways their lives were changed, nor whether the young/old Paul told anyone except his wife and his female companion in the retirement home. Paul is the first to encounter the miracle of healing, when John cures him of a painful urinary tract infection. He is released from pain, to enjoy life again. The other guards witness the mouse being brought back from the dead. They see – and believe! Through miracles, they see John in a new way and are prepared to take risks, escorting him out of jail at night to use his healing powers on the woman with the inoperable brain tumor (cf risks the friends took to take the man to Jesus for healing in Mark 2:1-5). The guard who weeps at the execution can be compared to the army officer who recognised Jesus as the Son of God but was duty bound to play his role in the execution (Mt 27:54).

- Discuss what we do when we encounter the miraculous and transcendent in everyday life. How does it change our behavior and outlook? Is our experience part of our 'privatised faith', or do we feel compelled to share it with others?

Eternal life

The 'bookends' framing of the film (a la Titanic) with the old Paul adds a different (and unhelpful) element to the film. Paul's wife, son and loved ones have died, and he is 'condemned/ cursed' to continue to live on in this earthly life (along with Mr Jingles!). Some of John's 'magic' has been transferred to Paul with longevity the outcome. Imagine if the 'magic' transferred was the ability to heal, to sense the pain of others, to give his life to others, to bring hope, to point to the transcendent. Yet his encounter with John does not seem to have been a 'St Paul on the road to Damascus' conversion experience (Acts 9). Paul's additional years do not seem to have meaning or purpose. On the other hand, when John Coffey is offered an opportunity to escape his execution, he says he is tired and wants it all to be finished, seeking release from the troubles of this earthly life, and from the pain of other people which is too strong to bear ('like shards of glass in my head'). What might his hopes be for life beyond death? As he awaits execution, John sings the short refrain, 'heaven, I'm in heaven' (from Top Hat, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, 1935), to calm his fears as he awaits execution, to keep his focus on the hope that lies ahead. Jesus had the same sense of anguish and yet seeking of God's will in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:36-39).

- Discuss the nature and purpose of life – in the present (Jn 10.10) and in the life to come (Jn3:16)

Vengeance

As well as John's tenderness in the movie, we see a concern for justice (or vengeance?). Jesus pointed to characteristics of God's nature – caring for people on the margins, caring for neighbor, love, compassion, acceptance etc. The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) reveal a God of justice. Jesus points to this in parables and in his teaching. It is an aspect many Christians play down, or feel uncomfortable about. In the movie, John's actions trigger the downfall of two characters. Percy, the governor's sadistic nephew, misuses his power and position, and is shown as a cruel, merciless, sadistic man, who takes out his misplaced anger on the prisoners. After inhaling the flies exhaled by John, he kills an inmate (Billy the Kid), almost in a zombie fashion (akin to 'the voices made me do it'). Finally, he is 'condemned' to a mental institution, apparently stripped of any emotions. The viewer has no sympathy for Billy the Kid's fate who is guilty of violent crimes, and taunts and defiles the guards (spitting body fluids and masticated food). John explains his actions by saying that both men were bad, the inference being that they deserved to be punished/killed.

- Is what happens to Billy the Kid and Percy consistent with the nature of God? What about God's justice, and vengeance?

The human spirit

'The human spirit is alive and well, even under the most difficult circumstances. Sometimes the more difficult life becomes, the more the human spirit has a chance to shine'. (Stephen King on 'The Green Mile'). John could have allowed suffering, hardship and persecution to have dampened/twisted/destroyed his spirit. Instead, he remains an innocent, almost child like and naïve, an agent of (God's?) hope and healing, able to enter into the suffering of others rather than being pre-occupied by his own needs and situation. There are many real life examples.

Dietrick Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who was imprisoned and executed in Flossenbug Concentration Camp in World War II because of his opposition to Hitler's policies was a man who refused to

have his human spirit dampened by his circumstances. He continued to see the 'big picture' and the needs of others.

'The ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation shall continue to live' (from *After Ten Years*, 1942)

'It is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. In so doing, we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsamene'. (Letters and Papers from Prison, P. 194)

- Discuss suffering and the human spirit in the light of the quotes, understandings from Scripture and your own experience and wisdom.

God's choice of 'agents' in the world

John Coffey is a towering black man with great strength and presence. His appearance would have made him immediately suspect, especially in the period in which the story is set. Yet he is the means through which a divine force acts to bring healing and miracles. In the biblical narrative, God uses the most unlikely sort of people to bring healing and hope and transformation, and to accomplish God's mission. Examples include Rahab the Canaanite prostitute (Joshua 2), Moses (a murderer), and Paul who had persecuted the Christians. There are many other examples in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. We live in a time when churches can be easily seduced into 'performance' mode, where only the 'best' people participate in up front worship and leadership, where auditions are held for the church choir to screen out 'unsuitable' people, or where strict criteria is placed on the sort of people who can be involved in the ministry of the church. Such people as God might choose are often marginalised.

- Discuss your experience of participation in the life of the church – who gets the nod and who is left out. What does it mean in the light of the 'body of Christ' where all have a role to play (1 Corinthians 12).

Sin and Evil

If John Coffey represents goodness and kindness, evil is represented through characters like Percy Wetmore (his name makes sense when you've seen the movie!!) and Billy the Kid. Evil can overtake anyone - whatever their status. The visually stunning image of the flies represents the tangible evidence of the judgement of God and also the destructive influence of evil on people's lives, made evident through disease and suffering. (This raises the complex question about the nature of illness as evidence of the presence of sin and evil!). Swarms of flies are used by God to force the Egyptian king to release the Israelites (Exodus 8:21-31) when 'the whole land of Egypt was brought to ruin by the flies', recounted in Psalm 78:45. The ancient Canaanite and Philistine city of Ekron was associated with the worship of the deity Baalzebub (Baal/Lord of the flies). The Christian Scriptures refer to the supremely evil being Satan (the devil) as Beelzebub, always hostile to God and to God's people. Both 'deities' point to the cosmic battle between good and evil that permeates the Scriptures. The flies (This raises the complex question about the nature of illness as evidence of the presence of sin and evil!)

- Discuss the 'cosmic battle' in the film, Scriptures and life experience.

Sanctity and value of human life

The reality of death permeates the air on death row – ever present and oppressive. Yet, in an ironic twist, the Warden Hal Moores (James Cromwell) struggles to come to terms with his wife's terminal illness and cannot tell her the truth about her condition. Perhaps it shows he has not grown immune to the reality of death, untouched by the pain and uncertainty of imminent death (cf the clinical attitude of some 'helping' professionals). Perhaps it indicates a belief that some lives have more value than others, and therefore triggers different emotions. Perhaps emotions are reserved for 'good' people, since 'bad' people have obviously forfeited their right for care and compassion.

- Discuss the differing attitudes to the value of human life in the film.

Capital Punishment

Despite the graphic nature of the executions depicted in the film, the question of capital punishment is not the primary focus of the story. However, a worthwhile discussion could emerge, especially as capital punishment continues to be a key strategy in law control in many parts of the world. This could be a highly emotive topic, so care should be taken on the way views are expressed (ie explore the issue together rather than taking strongly polarised viewpoints). Christians do not all share the same viewpoint and Scripture can be used to support different approaches to the issue.

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