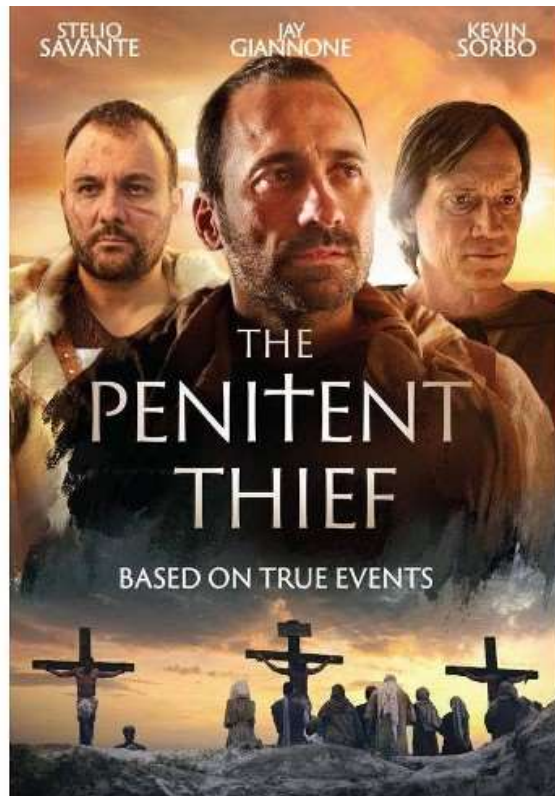


*The Penitent Thief* (M) is an imagined story based on the book by Don Willis (also the screenwriter), about the two men who were crucified with Jesus. The story revolves around the brothers given the names Dismas and Jotham, and a companion Gestas, and their perhaps rather mediocre life of crime and chaos from children to adults.



The context and theme of forgiveness is highlighted from the start with the boy Dismas making it clear to his mother that he is not able to forgive his neglectful and abusive father. The theme of how people approach forgiveness is prominent as most of the characters are wronged by others, and it is of course the focus for the concluding scene on the cross.

The movie follows the development of the boys, particularly Dismas from just a regular naughty boy to a regular thief through a series of circumstances that introduce other characters that connect with aspects of the biblical narrative.

I was reminded of Dickens' characters Oliver Twist and Fagin, combined with the modern-day tragedy of the African child soldier in terms of the influence of those who take the role of his absent father on the development of Dismas.

Well-known Christian faith film actor Kevin Sorbo (also known from the series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*) has a role as King Herod, and for me illustrated his potential as a Shakespearean actor, adding more to this character than the basic person that Herod was.

There are some usual inaccuracies with the arrival of the Magi, and the context of the killing of the male children, but as the introduction explains it is a work of imagination, focussing on being faithful to Jesus as the Messiah.

*The Penitent Thief* will provoke thought and more consideration of this side-character who is also one of the most captivating figures in the biblical record. A strength of the film is in the localised settings. These provide a helpful picture of the simple and ordinary nature of living in biblical times. While not as dramatic as *The Passion of the Christ*, the end scene is sincerely framed in a stylistic fashion that stays with the viewer.

What I liked about this movie was the use of 'God-incidence'. Interestingly Dickens used this device regularly, though for him it was simply a secular tool for creating connections and keeping the reader journeying as he wrote in serial format. In this film, it is a pointer to the simple truth that we may never know what part we play in God's plan until the grand end.

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