Samson and Delilah:
searching for hope amid despair

Film Review by Peter Bentley

Is there any hope in some communities? One of the unfortunate tasks in some modern film making seems to be taking people with you in despair, and then adding more despair until you are made to identify totally with the hopelessness that is at the centre of the director's life. In *Samson and Delilah* there are strong and confronting scenes, but there is also a theme of hope. It is not a prosperity gospel based hope which is perhaps the bizarre theme in the 2009 Academy Award winner *Slumdog Millionaire*. No winning the big one for Samson or Delilah, their eventual escape is to a simple life, through love.

Sixty years ago Cecil B Demille released Samson and Delilah with Hedy Lamarr and Victor Mature showing a rather more traditional portrayal of strength, love, betrayal and revenge.

In 2009 Rowan McNamara is Samson, a 15 year old mainly focussed on petrol sniffing, who takes life as it comes in a marginalised and ill-supported Aboriginal community. Marissa Gibson is Delilah, a 16 year old carer for her 'Nana,' caught in the life she has been given, but one who glimpses the good and possible.

What is the way out of a cycle of hopelessness? There are continuing, but unanswered questions about who or what enslaves people like Samson and Delilah in the 21st century.

Samson and Delilah has garnered public and critical acclaim for director Warwick Thornton, including the best first feature film at Cannes 2009. He had previously been widely involved in cinematography, and made several short films and documentaries including *Rosalie's Journey* about the star of the Chauvel film *Jedda*. The film is well, though simply, photographed, and the Australian outback and desert are lovingly portrayed, providing a striking contrast to the expensive looking visual depth of the film *Australia*.

It is a film that uses silence and non-visual communication in many subtle ways. The main spoken language is Warlpiri, sub-titled in English.

There are many memorable scenes, from the irony of the opening with Charley Pride's 'Sunshiny Day' beaming forth while Samson awakes and starts his usual day with his head in a tin can, to the juxtaposition of Delilah sitting in Alice Springs, offering a shy smile behind two girls wearing pristine school uniforms, one of them chatting merrily on her mobile phone. She is like them, and yet so unlike them in experience. Mitjili Napanangka Gibson as Nana is

a striking character, but her paintings also play a strong role in the film, and provide a real life context and underlying connection for Delilah. There is a telling scene where Delilah sees one of her Nana's paintings in an art gallery with a $22,000 price tag.

It would appear from this film that Warwick Thornton is also considering how the contemporary Aboriginal experience cannot be understood without reference to Christianity. The cross is a central symbol, from the simple cross in the tin shed chapel in the Aboriginal community to which Delilah takes her Nana to worship in silence, to the placing of a cross in the family home at the end of the film, where Delilah reclaims her place in her country. While no answers are given, the elements of Christian symbolism and consideration of Aboriginal art and dreaming must be related to the influential experience that Warwick Thornton had at Salvado College at the Catholic Monastery in New Norcia in WA. His mother sent him there as a 13 year old, seemingly to have him straightened out, and he learnt to appreciate the regulated and simple lifestyle.

There is also some ambivalence about Christian institutions, as evidenced by the scene where Delilah goes into a modern-style church and is met by a young priest. In an interview with Keith Gallasch, Warwick Thornton says of this scene in the Alice Springs church: "It was interesting, that priest. I'd written this really bad piece of dialogue, you know, "Get out, get out!" It was horrific. I'd always hated it through all the drafts."

By cutting the dialogue totally, the scene is left open-ended. The audience fills in the blanks, perhaps most of us feeling the priest is left not knowing what to say to the young girl who has come in. Could the priest not give adequate answers or comfort to what he perceived was her situation?

Music references abound and these are a key to understanding and appreciating the film. Warwick's brother plays Gonzo, an alcoholic who is one of the few people to provide some basic human friendship to the pair when they meet up with him in his zone underneath the town bridge. He leaves when he is provided with a spot in a rehab centre, and goes off singing 'Jesus gonna be here' by Tom Waits, illustrating again an ambivalence with organised religion, because it is 'the Christians' who provide this service. He will get his three meals a day, but where does this Jesus bit fit in?

And perhaps most significantly there are the hair-cutting scenes with connections which most critics seem to have missed. Delilah cuts her own lovely hair after the death of her Nana. In the Warlpiri tradition, this shows mourning and humility, a cutting of any vanity. She takes away from herself.

Samson also cuts his hair when he mourns, and progresses into an even lower ebb without any strength or conviction as his addiction takes over his being. It is when he is at his lowest that Delilah is able to help him. She is not the temptress or betrayer of the Bible, but an angel of light, radiating an image of hope and renewal, helping him out of his physical and mental state. One critic, Sandra Hall (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 May 2009) has written that Thornton "has Delilah helping the spaced-out Samson to bathe himself — a scene filled with intimations of baptism and regeneration."

There is a welcome innocence about this love and their life that makes one consider the counter cultural message of the Christian gospel. In a way, I can see that Thornton is perhaps providing an understated reflection about his own understanding of unconditional love. He does not articulate this in a way churchgoers would do in a word-based sermon, but he appears to have an overriding need to show a message of unconditional love to his own community and the wider community today.

At the end Charley Pride's song — 'All I have to offer you is me' — closes out the film and captures what they have to offer to each other. They do not have wealth, success, worldly trappings, and Delilah's 'family home' is certainly no mansion. In the end there is simply a new hope for Samson and Delilah, but we don't know where this will lead — even though the cross has been put in place. ■

Suicide bombers, ethnic cleansing and monarchy

Anyone who thought the seventh book of the Bible was a mere catalogue of gratuitous violence and deceit would be right, and wrong. At first sight Judges looks like the answer to an anti-religionist's prayer. It tells what happens when religion gets hold of a people. But it isn't religion that's at fault.

Twice in its 21 chapters the book pronounces judgment on lawlessness. "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." [Ju. 17:6; 21:25] This isn't a plug for the monarchy, but for a desperately needed binding authority. The editors of the story of Israel between entering Canaan and choosing Saul as king show what leaderless chaos is really like. And what it means for a people to break covenant with their God.

Speaking to the Auburn (Hawthorn) congregation recently Dr. Sandy Yule brought *Judges* to vivid life and posed three questions that show the book's contemporary importance. Dr. Yule is secretary of the UCA Assembly's Christian Unity Working Group.

His questions were :

1. Judges 2: 6 — 3:6. Is God in favour of ethnic cleansing (the extermination of Canaan's inhabitants)?
2. Judges 16: 23-31. God answered Samson's prayer for help in his 'murder-suicide'. What can we say about God's attitude to suicide bombers?
3. Judges 17:6 and 21:25. (cited above) Is this a pro-monarchic statement? Can we agree with the implied judgment on anarchy here?

These questions prompted the hearers to take a fresh look at the modern scourge of suicide bombers, through the story of Samson. For example, if suicide bombers are no more than evil fanatics, why does God answer Samson's prayer for revenge on the Philistines? If racial enmity is wrong, is today's fashionable notion of universal tolerance a better alternative? Are all races and cultures of equal merit?

Monarchy continues to be an issue for Australians. While it may have only symbolic importance today, are the alternatives superior? Will a republic bring anything to Australia that we do not already enjoy?

The overriding motif of Judges is Israel's lawless individuality. Australians also do what is right in their own eyes, despite the mountain of laws, regulations and by-laws they are forced to endure. Possibly the editors of Judges, writing with the benefit of hindsight, saw the monarchy as a cure for anarchy.

Another view may be found in Samuel's bitter disappointment when the people asked him to anoint a king, even after he predicted dire consequences for the people. [1 Sam. 910-22] Does this mean monarchy has divine sanction?

Questions like these bring the book of Judges out of a primitive past into the present with its many problems of law, order and government. Judges declares that these questions cannot be resolved without recourse to the will of God and the divine covenant established with all mankind. ■