

Enchanted evenings

Why not invite a few friends over to your home in January to watch a DVD and discuss the themes?

The Climb (PG, 2002)

This mountaineering drama is actually a well-produced look at faith and family relationships, especially the influence of one's father. Ned Vaughan plays Michael Harris and Jason George Derrick Williams, two mountain climbers with different outlooks on faith and life who are teamed up for a one-off climb. There are some excellent mountain scenes – you may be inspired to do some rock-climbing at least. I liked the extended cameo role given to Dabney Coleman, who plays the head of the company that sponsors the men. Quite suitable for a broad group, though there are some distinct themes for men.

The Encounter (PG, 2010)

A group of strangers end up in a diner in an isolated area and are led to talk about meaning in their lives as they encounter a stranger who is revealed as Jesus. The film features Christian singer Jaci Velazquez as follower needing help, and professional wrestler Steve 'Sting' Borden, who is like the rich man in the parable in Luke 12. There is a strong focus on contemporary issues and matters, including some sensitive personal matters that are rarely discussed let alone in a Christian film. This is quite an intriguing way to raise consideration of what is important to people, highlighting peoples' needs, and not what they want. Jesus is the example of grace and openness, though there is a little bit of the genial restaurant host. Suitable for a quiet reflective group.

Forgiven (PG, 2011)

The title clearly plays against the Clint Eastwood Oscar Winner *Unforgiven*, and the contrast is certainly evident. The film is actually a re-edited version of *The Legend of Jake*

Kincaid (2002 TV movie), as director Alan Autry wanted to make it an even more positive Christian film.

Autry also stars as Jake Kincaid, a former soldier, wrongly imprisoned and now bent on revenge. The film is a bit of a nod to different western genres and there are many seeming references, from *True Grit* to other Eastwood films, including *Pale Rider* and *High Plains Drifter*, though.

It is worth seeing for the depiction of ordinary people as Christians in a town, rather than simply the preacher, though needs a much more substantial edit, and also some attention to the use of music, which is often overdone. Suitable perhaps for a grandfather with teenage boys, but older boys may feel it is a little simplistic and slow.

The Potential Inside (PG, 2010)

There is certainly growing interest in cycling events in Australia. A common theme in these films is how do people (and people of faith) cope with a tragedy? Here a professional cyclist has to find his life again, and also come to terms with the help he needs to be able to help others. The film itself is surprisingly slow in parts (or perhaps deliberately reflective), but the racing scenes will appeal to enthusiasts and are well-scripted. Suitable for those with a sporting interest.

Soul Surfer (PG, 2011)

You may have seen the documentary about Bethany Hamilton *Heart of a Soul Surfer* (2007). Bethany is well-known in church as well as surfing circles, following a shark



Actor AnnaSophia Robb with pro surfer Bethany Hamilton.

attack in Hawaii in October 2003 which took her left arm. This film is the Hollywood production, and thus is not as overt in its Christian message, though it clearly outlines her faith, and the faith of her family and friends. One good aspect of the film is that their faith is presented as a natural part of their lives, and is not at all the preachy or judgemental style that is sometimes depicted in Hollywood films.

The Hamilton family and Bethany clearly had the ability to control the content and image, and since the target audience is family and church based, the film is no standard surfing film. There are however, some excellent surfing scenes and parts that for me, actually showed the wonder of the creation that God has worked in the sea. The Hollywood budget clearly shows in the surfing scenes, and are necessary as Bethany was (and is) involved in the professional surfing arena.

The actors are professionals, including Oscar winner Helen Hunt as Bethany's mother Cheri, and Dennis Quaid as her father Tom. Teenage and family film actor AnnaSophia Robb plays Bethany and manages to garner sympathy without appealing to sentimentalism. Kevin Sorbo from 'What if ...' plays a family friend who was in the water when Bethany was attacked.

There are some good, if somewhat brief scenes that consider questions about suffering and faith, especially related to her moves to go back to surfing and competition.

The film also connects with other real-life events, notably the recovery and re-establishing efforts of many individuals and groups following the 2004 Asian Tsunami. The film captures the spirit of Bethany's first visit to the tourist area of Phuket in Thailand which helped to develop her own ministry.

I loved the closing line in the film: "I have the ability to embrace more people than I ever could with two arms." One way she has done this is through Friends of Bethany, a non-profit organisation dedicated to sharing the hope and love of Jesus Christ worldwide by providing support to shark attack survivors and amputees, and seeking to tell inspiring stories like her own life, but also of others.

Bethany has spoken of people she admires like Nick Vujicic and Joni Eareckson Tada, but it is her faith in

her Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ that stands out. I could see this being a popular and helpful film for teens and groups (perhaps a blanket screening arrangement for beach missions?).

And to be extended
The Adjustment Bureau (M, 2011)

The Universal Pictures media release asked "Do we control our destiny, or do unseen forces manipulate us? A man glimpses the future Fate has planned for him and realizes he wants something else. To get it, he must pursue across, under and through the streets of modern-day New York the only woman he's ever loved."

Science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick provided Hollywood with a large body of material for some incredibly lateral scripts, from *Blade Runner* (1982) to what I believe to be the most intriguing, the recent film *The Adjustment Bureau*. Matt Damon is US Senate candidate David Norris, a man with a clear future and a seeming natural ability to serve his nation, who has a 'chance' meeting with contemporary dancer Elise Sellas played by Emily Blunt.

While trying to meet up with Elise again, David finds out that the 'bureau' are working to prevent this, as Elise is not part of the plan they have for his life. David learns that people have caseworkers (at times likened to that of being a secular angel) who help to keep order and maintain the plan for life when events cause disruptions and changes.

The film is well-paced and has some dynamic footage, meaning it is best watched on a larger screen. As usual, the city of New York becomes another character to highlight the complex developments.

This film fits in well with my 'pre-evangelism' film list. It can be used to initiate discussion about life, fate and faith. Even the symbolism of doors being opened, closed, and leading to new possibilities is a significant link. I am sure we can all testify to this after the event.

The Beaver (M, 2011)

Many critics did not know what to do with *The Beaver*, a film starring Mel Gibson, and directed by another Oscar winner Jodie Foster. Given Mel Gibson's rather provocative life of late, I perceive that some were hoping this would be a good chance to put the

boot in. However, his performance and the theme were too significant to ignore or dismiss. The film opens with the narrative voice we will come to know and understand. "This is a picture of Walter Black, a hopelessly depressed individual. Somewhere inside him is a man who fell in love. Who started a family. Who ran a successful company. That man has gone missing. No matter what he's tried, and he's tried everything, Walter can't seem to bring him back. It's as if he's died, but hasn't had the good sense to take his body with him."

This is a challenging and mostly sensitive consideration of the growing and tragic difficulties associated with depression and the effects on a family. Gibson's character is so consumed by depression that he can barely get out of bed.

His sudden connection with a hand puppet he has found, provides him with a way to relate again with the world and re-new his career and life. He gives people a card with the words: "Hello. The person who handed you this card is under the care of a prescription puppet, designed to help create a psychological distance between himself and the negative aspects of his personality. Please treat him as you normally would, but address yourself to the puppet. Thank you."

Now, many viewers will find some aspects a little odd, perhaps downright crazy, but that is partly the idea. Sometime it takes a different way of presenting a mental health issue like Russel Crowe as John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind*, to cause people to reflect again.

A separate story within the film considers the depression within Walter's son Porter, and his growing difficulties. The film is also a parody on the USA and modern consumer life, reminding me a little of the film *Being There*, in which a simple man is set on the path to become the President because people see only what they want to see.

Some people believe there are some aspects which could not happen, but considering some reality TV shows in the USA, many scenes are not that outlandish at all, even though the directing and style of the film is itself actually more than conventional. Not for joyful watching, but for reflecting on our fallen world.

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