



A TIME TO KILL (Cert 15)

Reel Issues author: Ian Maher

Overview: Tense, racial justice drama

Director: Joel Schumacher

Distributor: Warner Bros

SUMMARY OF PLOT

Set in the town of Clanton, Mississippi, this is the story of a man who takes justice into his own hands. Carl Lee Hailey (Samuel L Jackson) is the father of a ten-year-old African-American girl, Tonya (Raevan Larymore Kelly), who was raped and left for dead by two white racists. Tonya survives, however, and the men are arrested to stand trial for rape and attempted murder. On their way to the courtroom for their preliminary hearing, Carl shoots the rapists dead. To defend him, Carl hires a struggling young lawyer, Jake Brigance (Matthew McConaughey). A plea of temporary insanity is seen as Carl's only hope.

The film unfolds against a backdrop of racial tension fuelled by Freddie Cobb (Kiefer Sutherland) who calls in the Ku Klux Klan. In a part of the United States with a history of racial abuse, Jake finds the odds stacking up against him for the courtroom battle, not least due to the selection of an all-white jury. In addition, he is forced to send his wife and daughter away from the dangers posed by the Klan. Jake's main ally in the case is Ellen Roark (Sandra Bullock), a young, rich law student opposed to the death penalty.

Dr Rodeheaver (Anthony Heald), head of a state mental hospital and one of the prosecution's main witnesses, has his credibility undermined after Ellen breaks in to his office. There she uncovers the fact that Dr Rodeheaver had found previous defendants sane, even those later committed to his institution. Jake uses this information to good effect.

Further support for the defence is given by a policeman who lost a leg after being accidentally wounded in Carl's killing of the rapists. In spite of his injuries, he is adamant in court that Carl should go unpunished: "He's a hero. You turn him loose!" In his closing statement Jake asks the jury to close their eyes, picture the awful crime, and then imagine that the little girl was white. The jury return a verdict of not guilty, and Carl is set free.

SOME KEY ISSUES

Justice and vengeance – there is a fine line between the two.

Punishment to fit the crime – Carl Lee Hailey believes that the attackers of his young daughter deserve the maximum penalty sanctioned by the state judicial system but that there is no likelihood of this being invoked for a crime by white men against a black girl. So he administers his own justice.

Taking the law into your own hands – Carl Lee sees no alternative to his actions if justice is to be served.

The dependence of justice upon a reliable legal system – Jake doubts that Carl Lee will receive a fair trial in a state with a sorry history of racist miscarriages of justice.

CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

Clip 1

Show from the start of the film up to and including the arrest of Carl Lee Hailey following the shooting of his daughter's rapists. Before showing the clip, ask people to stay particularly aware of their emotional responses.

Small group exercise and discussion:

- What emotions did the awful crime committed against little Tonya Hailey provoke in you?

List these on a large sheet of paper. Then share your thoughts about Carl Lee Hailey's actions.

Group discussion:

Knowing that even a conviction, let alone a death sentence, against attackers was unlikely in a Mississippi court, Carl Lee executed them.

- Was this an act of justice or vengeance?

Clip 2

Show the section in which the policeman wounded accidentally by Carl Lee gives his testimony in court.

Group discussion:

- Do you agree or disagree with the policeman's statement: "He's a hero. You turn him loose!" and for what reasons?
- What dangers can you see arising when justice is removed from a framework of law?

OUR STORY

In pairs:

Discuss any incidents the media has brought to your attention to which you have responded with words such as "(s)he should be strung up for what (s)he has done". (This might be in relation to a specific offence or to a category of crime.) Why do you believe such strong emotions are evoked?

Small group discussion:

Do you think there is any instance in which you might be tempted to take the law into your own hands? For justice to be served, should the punishment always fit the crime?

Group discussion:

Talk about any experiences that you have of being on the receiving end of injustice. This might have been a

major issue or a relatively small incident. How did it make you feel and what, if anything, were you able to do in addressing the injustice? List any common threads on a large sheet of paper.

GOD'S STORY

God has given to us free will, making it possible to accept or reject his love. A relationship with God is not something imposed on us but a wonderful gift to which we can say "yes" or "no". There are, however, considerable responsibilities and obligations for those who respond to God's love. God looks for justice (e.g. Leviticus 19.15–16; Deuteronomy 16.18–20; Amos 8.5) tempered with mercy. The prophet Micah expresses it in this way: ". . . the Lord has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God" (Micah 6.8).

A measure of true justice is at one level to be found in how we exercise our responsibilities towards the marginalised and the powerless. The people of God are called to be a voice against the oppression of human dignity, with a willingness to stand against all that is dehumanising. Jesus himself offers a stark reminder of the need to take up the cause of the poor of the earth and to challenge the roots of their suffering: "I was hungry but you would not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me a drink; I was a stranger but you would not welcome me in your homes, naked but you would not clothe me; I was sick and in prison but you would not take care of me . . . I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me" (Matthew 25.42–45). At another level, justice in human society means that there must be consequences for acts which break the laws which enable people to live together. But true justice is tempered with mercy and it is this vital ingredient

which avoids the danger of seeking only vengeance for wrongs committed.

Group activity and discussion:

Read Matthew 25.31–46 – Consider who you regard as the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the prisoner, and so on, in our own society. What injustices have contributed to the plight of such people and could more be done to help them?

Group discussion:

To challenge the oppressive roots of injustice is very often a costly task. This is clear when considering, for example, the root causes of the suffering portrayed in the film. Consider times in your own life, or perhaps in the life of a friend, where making a stand for what you believe is right has carried a personal cost. Share these instances with each other.

Small group activity and discussion:

Power and prejudice are rarely far away when injustice is present. List the ways in which you feel this was true in the film considered. Then discuss God's attitude towards injustice in the light of passages such as Leviticus 19.15–16; Deuteronomy 16.18–20; Amos 8.5 and others that you are aware of. Do you think that the churches reflect God's attitude as much as they should?

Group discussion:

What do you see as the difference between justice and vengeance when thinking of a response to crimes? It might help to think of some dramatic, well publicised crime to help you get in touch with some of the feelings that so often determine responses (for example, the murder of a child).

Ian Maher is Multifaith Chaplaincy Co-ordinator at Sheffield Hallam University. Ian is a Church Army officer who has used Reel Issues approaches in

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