



AMISTAD (Cert 15)

Reel Issues author: Ian Maher

Director: Steven Spielberg

Distributor: Dreamworks / HBO

Caution: Includes some strong violence in opening sequence

THE FILM STORY

Set in 1839, *Amistad* tells the story of how 53 African slaves break free from the hold of the Spanish slave trading vessel "La Amistad". The slaves kill most of the crew and demand that the remainder take them back to Africa. From Cuba, unbeknown to the slaves, the helmsman steers along the American coastline until after weeks at sea the ship is arrested by an American naval vessel. The slaves are taken to New Haven and put on trial for murder. However, Joadson (Morgan Freeman) and Tappan (Stellan Skarsgard) – two abolitionists – take up the slaves' cause and employ Roger Baldwin (Matthew McConaughey), a young attorney, to defend them. Over time Baldwin slowly begins to understand the story being told by Cinque (Djimon Hounsou), the leader amongst the Africans. As the court case continues, the full horror of the slave trade emerges against the politics of pre-Civil War America in which concerted pressure is exerted by the pro-slavery southern states to resist the abolitionists. Eventually, following a powerful appeal to the Supreme Court from former President John Quincy Adams (Anthony Hopkins), the Africans are set free and journey home to Africa.

SOME KEY ISSUES

Freedom as a basic human right – the Africans in *Amistad* are treated as less than human.

The human spirit's desperate yearning to be free – the slaves seize the chance to escape, fighting to the death on the slave vessel in order to be free.

The struggle of the abolitionists to free the pro-slave lobby from their inhuman prejudices.

CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

Clip 1 – DVD chapter 11, approx 8 minutes

Cinque recounts to the court the horror of the journey on a slave trader from Africa to Cuba.

Group discussion:

Gather some immediate reactions to the clip. It is a very harrowing section of film so make sure you allow enough time for people's responses. Then discover if people feel the slaves had any other option than to kill crew members of the *Amistad* as they made their desperate bid for freedom. Is violence sometimes inevitable for the preservation of freedom?

Clip 2 – DVD chapters 20–21, approx 8.30 minutes (or extend the clip 2.15 minutes into chapter 22, ending where the Court gives its verdict and Cinque's shackles are broken.)

Former President John Quincy Adams addresses the Supreme Court with the result that the slaves are set free.

Group discussion:

- What things particularly struck you about Quincy Adams' appeal?

OUR STORY

Small group exercise:

Look through some recent newspapers or magazines and identify stories and articles that refer to situations where human freedom is curtailed or under threat. Cut these out and paste them onto a large sheet of paper or card. Amistad highlighted how the vested interests of pre-Civil War American politics perpetuated the evil of slavery. Look through the cuttings that you have collected and, using a felt-tip pen, summarise in a word or two the vested interests at work behind those examples.

Whole group discussion (together as a whole group):

In what ways might people challenge such freedom-curbing practices? Discuss this together and then consider any places within your own network of contacts and relationships where there is oppression. Can anything be done to bring about change?

GOD'S STORY

The Bible portrays freedom as a vital feature in the life of the people of God. The pivotal event in the Old Testament was God leading the Israelites from slavery in Egypt through the wilderness and into the Promised Land (Exodus 1 – 24; for a summary see Joshua 24). In the New Testament we read of Jesus Christ, through all that his life, death and resurrection accomplished, restoring us to a relationship with God. Through Jesus, if we turn to him in faith, we are freed from the consequences of the times when we let God down. In John's gospel we read that Jesus said "If you obey my teaching, you are really my disciples; you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8.31–32). There is a freedom that comes in following Christ that enables us to live life to the full. In that freedom we recognise God as a loving parent and relate to each

other as sisters and brothers, valuing all people as created in the likeness of God. The implications of this freedom are corporate as well as individual. Jesus himself was fierce in confronting the oppressive religious and political structures of his day (e.g. Luke 11.37–54). The values of God's Kingdom, which Jesus ushered in, are also directly opposed to any organisation, institution, or structure which diminishes human freedom and dignity. The freedom Christ brings should spill over into communities, societies and nations until the day when the whole earth shares in this freedom and the Kingdom is established in all its fullness. The films in this section highlight some ways in which freedom can be lost, recovered and appreciated anew.

Ian Maher is Multifaith Chaplaincy Co-ordinator at Sheffield Hallam University. Ian is a Church Army officer who has used Reel Issues approaches in evangelism and church settings. He regularly lectures on film and faith and is author of Reel Issues (Bible Society, 1998) and Faith and Film (Grove Books, 2002).

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