



THE SOLOIST (Cert 12)

Reel Issues author: Simon Carver

Overview: Based on a true story, a journalist develops a friendship with a brilliant musician he finds living and playing on the streets of Los Angeles.

Director: Joe Wright (2009) **Distributor:** Universal Pictures

Length: 135 mins

Cautions: The backdrop to the film is mental illness and homelessness. It contains one use of strong language, moderate threat and drug use.

THE FILM

The Soloist is an adaptation of the book of the same name written by Steve Lopez (Robert Downey Jr). Lopez, a writer on The LA Times, had a chance encounter with a homeless man playing a battered, two-string violin and wrote about it in his column. Lopez made it his business to find out more about the man, Nathaniel Ayers (Jamie Foxx), and he discovered that he was a talented musician who had dropped out of the prestigious Juilliard School in New York having developed schizophrenia. Having written about Ayers, Lopez received the gift of a cello which he passed on to Ayers. The film follows Lopez's befriending Ayers and his not always well-received attempts to help him re-establish a musical career.

FIRST REACTIONS

- A criticism that has been made of the film is that its story doesn't follow the path that the viewer would expect it to take. Did you find the story confused? If so, do you think that this was a product of its subject – homelessness and mental

illness – or simply that it is a true, and, as yet, unfinished story?

- Another accusation has been that Lopez took advantage of Ayers in order to write 'a good story'. Do you agree? Could that same accusation be levelled at the film's producers or is the opposite true, i.e. has *The Soloist* raised the profile of homelessness and mental illness in a beneficial fashion?
- How did the film make you feel? Did you feel uplifted at Nathaniel Ayers's achievements or frustrated at how his illness had curtailed a potentially brilliant career ... or both? Did you feel that Were Steve Lopez's efforts to rehabilitate Nathaniel Ayers were insignificant in the face of a bigger problem? Did the film make you want to get involved in working with people with mental health problems or who are homeless? Was there anything you saw in the film that would put you off getting involved?

INTERACTIONS

- **Read Mark 1:40–45.** When Nathaniel and Steve first met, Steve offered Nathaniel his hand, but Nathaniel ignored it. The man who begged Jesus to heal his leprosy was like Nathaniel, in that he was shunned and living away from 'decent people'. Steve was ready to touch Nathaniel just as Jesus reached out and touched the leper. How much is touch important in breaking down barriers? Why do you think that Nathaniel was unwilling for Steve to touch him?
- The city of Los Angeles is viewed at different times of day and from different angles. We see the slums by night, a busy road tunnel with cars rushing by, a hectic office, a concert hall, a pleasant square with statues and from above, a tangle of concrete and

asphalt. Might LA be described as a non-speaking character in the story? If so, what sort of character is it?

- **Read Matthew 25:14–30** 'I spent a lot of money on booze, birds and fast cars. The rest I just squandered.' (attributed to George Best)

We all have a different understanding of what constitutes success and are likely to ponder 'what might have been' when a talented person falls short of our expectations. How do we balance what both the Bible and our natural instincts have to say about how we use our talents and God's perspective on the nature of success?

- Steve Lopez organised a 'cello teacher, a Christian, for Nathaniel and an apartment in which the lessons could take place. What was your reaction to the way that Graham Claydon dealt with Nathaniel? How sympathetically do you think that Christianity was reflected in the film?
- The manager of the homeless shelter showed more interest in his clients as individuals rather than in diagnosing them in contrast to Steve Lopez who wanted to get treatment for Nathaniel, if necessary by force. With whom did you find yourself siding?
- **Read Matthew 25:31-46** Jesus called his disciples to clothe, feed and house those whom we might describe as people 'on the margins'. Might we see this call as a definition of what it means to be a friend? What does this story have to say about the value of friendship?

CLIP TO DISCUSS

Watch Chapter 12, 56-01 – 1.00.13 (approx. 4 mins.)

Steve takes Nathaniel to a rehearsal by the LA Philharmonic of a Beethoven Symphony and

afterwards he meets Mary, his ex-wife, in a bar and discusses the experience.

- Synaesthesia is a condition in which a person experiences a sensory 'cross-over' in which letters, numbers and sounds are experienced as colours. Listening to the music produces a synaesthetic experience in Nathaniel.
- A number of visual and musical artists – such as Liszt and Rimsky-Korsakov – have been confirmed as synaesthetes, but there is also some connection between heightened artistic and musical abilities and conditions such as autism and schizophrenia. Steve Lopez seemed almost envious of the way in which Nathaniel experienced music, but do you think that it was a blessing or a curse?
- Ezekiel is one of a number of biblical characters who exhibited strange behaviour after having experienced the touch of God's hand on their lives. How are we to understand religious experience in a world in which talking to God – ie prayer – is considered acceptable, but hearing God respond is often classed as psychosis?
- Steve's ex-wife used the word 'grace' to describe the 'higher' way in which Nathaniel experienced music. Can you think of examples in which you have experienced life in a 'higher' way that could be described as 'grace'?

OTHER ANGLES TO TALK ABOUT

- **John 14.12** says 'I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.'

Christians believe that they have been called to do the things that Jesus did and yet we are constantly frustrated and disappointed that we fail to make

better the situations transformed with a touch or a word. Steve Lopez had to come to terms with his 'Messiah Complex' – that state of mind in which people believe that it is their responsibility to save others. How should we try to deal with our limitations as we seek to follow the call live like Jesus?

- Do you think that Steve Lopez believed that he had been 'successful'?
- What can we learn from this story about the nature of healing?
- Has this film made you want to try to help people who are homeless or suffering from mental illness? What might you do?

Simon Carver is the Senior Minister of Dagnall Street Baptist Church, St Albans. He is married and has three adult children. He writes and broadcasts on Christianity and contemporary culture and is a contributor to Flickering Images (Regent's/Smyth & Helwys, 2005).

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