



## CEMETERY JUNCTION (Cert 15)

**Reel Issues author:** Stephen Brown

**Overview:** In a drab, white-collar suburb, a trio of lads in 1970s England party and dream of escape. Only Freddie, groomed as a successful salesman, has the determination to make a go of things.

**Director:** Ricky Gervaise & Stephen Merchant (2010)

**Producer:** Sony Columbia

**Length:** 91 mins

**Cautions:** Infrequent very strong language, frequent strong language, sex references.

### SUMMARY OF PLOT

Summer 1973. Flourishing businessman Mr Kendrick (Ralph Fiennes) describes Cemetery Junction, an area of Reading, in negative terms, having been brought up there but now living in a highly desirable district. Freddie (Christian Cooke), a young man, has left the factory where his father and close friend Bruce (Tom Hughes) work to join Kendrick's insurance firm in the hope of becoming as successful as his new boss. He is trained by Mike (Matthew Goode), a ruthless individual engaged to Julie Kendrick (Felicity Jones) as part of a strategy to ultimately replace his father-in-law. Freddie's parents and grandmother are reactionary characters, espousing racist views and without ambitions. Bruce, forever in trouble, despises his father for not putting up a fight to keep the family together. He and Freddie have a naive pal, Snork (Jack Doolan), someone with few social skills. Bruce continually claims he's leaving the area but only when Freddie decides there's more to life than to be found where they are does he feel enabled to agree to do so. Snork is likewise persuaded. Both Freddie's friends belatedly discover good reasons to stay put but Julie,

seeing what marriage has done to her mother, races to the station to join Freddie.

### SOME KEY ISSUES

**Fear of death** – The insurance sales force pressurise customers into signing up for policies by brandishing death as having horrendous consequences for their survivors. 'When selling life assurance, you want the stench of death in their nostrils'.

**Indifference to others** – Those who are better off have little concern for those who are not, whether it be the insurance company boss in regard to his staff or working class families unmoved by television news of starving people abroad.

**Low ambition and quiet desperation** – Most characters have given up any hope of happiness or, at least, purpose and goals in their present lives. Nor can they see any way of changing them for the better. Or else they lack the courage to do so.

### CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

#### Clip 1 (DVD chapter 1)

*We see a cross-section of Reading life prior to Freddie getting his insurance job. He practises his sales technique in front of the bedroom mirror. Snork and Bruce creep up on him and mock Freddie for listening to a recording of Vaughan Williams' music, rather than Elton John's. They go out on the town where Snork makes inappropriate remarks and Bruce gets into a fight which lands them in the cells supervised by the friendly police sergeant who has known them all their lives.*

### *Small groups discussion and feedback*

- What do you think is going on for Bruce and Snork when they criticise Freddie's 'high-brow' music?
- In a subsequent scene, the three of them go out socialising. It would seem on the surface that Freddie has lost none of his ability to relate to his pals in the way he always has. Yet we already know he has different aspirations from theirs. How do you think he handles the two worlds he now inhabits?

### **Clip 2 (DVD chapter 3)**

*Freddie is on trial as an insurance agent under the supervision of Mike. When a couple of potential clients tell him they prefer to spend their money on a holiday he readily accepts. Mike takes over and frightens them into taking out a life policy.*

#### *In pairs*

- The clip begins by juxtaposing Freddie's working life with that of his father and Bruce. Freddie is heard as a voice-over in the factory posing a question from his training manual: What am I selling? He tells the couple that he is selling security but it is filmed as if he is inviting Bruce and Freddie's father to answer the same question. What do you think they would say? Would they refer to the product they are making, the skills they are employed for or something else?
- What emotional 'buttons' does Mike press to get the couple to change their minds? Bullying aside, does he have a point? Later, when the husband dies, the wife wishes they'd had that holiday rather than take out a policy. Why does she say that?
- When Freddie, amazed at Mike's selling ability, asks how he does it Mike replies 'Let them smell

the wraith'. How strong a fear of the consequences of a death is it for relatives left behind to fend for themselves?

### **Clip 3 (DVD chapter 20)**

Freddie is dismayed at how disastrous the insurance company's dinner turns out to be. His friends disgrace themselves, he pities the downtrodden Mrs Kendrick and, judging by Mike's and Kendrick's chauvinism, he fears for Julie's married future. His dejection is compounded by knee-jerk prejudices at home against books, travel, foreigners and homosexuals plus a failure of imagination in regard to any kind of life beyond where they happen to live.

#### *Buzz session*

- Characters keep making statements that are sweeping (You don't learn anything from books), self-contradictory (Blacks are both lazy yet also stealing our jobs) or ignorant (French food is awful). What do you consider underlies these attitudes? How could they be changed?
- Freddie quotes the ancient Arab saying he has learned from Julie: 'Throw your heart out in front of you and run ahead to catch it.' His father misses the point. What do you make of the motto? What examples can you give of people living out that proverb for themselves?
- Throughout the conversation at table Freddie is literally repeating ideas he has gleaned from Julie and reading from the National Geographic she has given him. Is he just trying them out on an unpromising audience or has he come to believe them for himself?

- Apart from knocking down Freddie's comments, what other evidence is there in this scene of the family oppressing one another? What are the chief ways they relate to each other, or fail to?

#### Clip 4 (DVD chapter 26)

*Even as they despair of the older generation, the young ones haven't really much idea of what to do with their own lives. This is partly because they are ignorant themselves as to what life is or could be like. Bruce has based his existence on a mis-reading of his parents' break-up, Snork has little idea how to relate to anyone, and even Freddie and Julie are more certain of what they're against than what they are for.*

#### Whole group discussion

- What happens to each of these four young people which is the making of them? Think in each case of what (or rather who) helps them see life differently/
- How credible is the film in the way it resolves each character's dilemma?
- Consider some other coming-of-age movies you can recall. What are the similarities and differences between those films and this one? For example, how does Cemetery Junction diverge from Billy Liar who likewise arranges with a girl to take a train away from it all?

#### GOD'S STORY

##### Living well: Ecclesiastes 3.9–22

The Old Testament writer is basically pessimistic about how we go about living. All of us will die and yet there is scope to enjoy ourselves if only we would.

- Is fear of death what cripples so many of the people in this film from taking risks and living life to the full? If so, is this because they want to survive as long as possible, even if unadventurously? Or because if by living life to the full it could mean sometimes doing the wrong thing for which they fear God's punishment in the afterlife?
- One way or another the question frequently asked in Cemetery Junction is what have you done with your life, with a negative implication hanging in the air. What suggestions does this biblical passage make that put a positive spin on our existence?
- Some of the film's older characters seem already departed – sleeping their lives away, being 'dead from the neck up', etc. Do you think Ecclesiastes is saying that since we are all heading towards the grave we ought not to mind? Or is the writer arguing for something else?
- Is it significant that the filmmakers decided to set their movie in Cemetery Junction rather than some other place? What are the good things about a 'cemetery' which could alter attitudes? Ecclesiastes 3.18 indicates that this life is a test to see what we make of it.

##### Compassion or indifference: Luke 16.19–31

Jesus told a story (parable) about an unnamed rich man who failed to take any notice of the starving beggar, Lazarus, who lay at his doorway. After death there came a reckoning whereby Lazarus was received into heaven but a gulf barred the rich man from entering. Later traditions gave the rich man the name of Dives.

- Freddie very near the beginning of the film is listening to Vaughan Williams' Dives and Lazarus on his record player. He has just been interviewed by Kendrick, the self-made business man, whom Freddie admires. If Jesus' parable is a critique of those 'haves' who neglect those who 'have not', what has that to do with this film?
- The parable doesn't say anything about whether either man deserves his lot. How relevant do you think being deserving or undeserving is when it comes to possessing material wealth? What if Lazarus was a good-for-nothing waster who has squandered his money and the rich man has conscientiously worked his socks off all his life?
- 'What similarities can you identify between the inhabitants of Cemetery Junction and the rich man in Jesus' parable? What implications might this passage of Scripture speak of for these characters?
- John also challenges the Laodiceans' complacency. It is a wealthy church, but John tells them that in reality they are poor (despite being located in a trading centre for gold and financial services), blind (even though the city was known for manufacturers of eye ointments) and naked (ironic again because Laodicea was a centre for the wool and clothing industry). How do you relate this to the relative prosperity of Cemetery Junction? What would John, if he were alive, be telling the people there?
- There's a famous picture by Holman Hunt called *The Light of the World* (for an example, see [http://www.aaronartprints.org/print\\_details.php?PaintingID=5064](http://www.aaronartprints.org/print_details.php?PaintingID=5064)). It makes reference to Revelation's image of Jesus standing at a door knocking. However, the handle (we guess) is on the inside. The door can only be opened by whoever is in there. Who comes knocking at, so to speak, the leading characters' doors in the film? How are these wake-up calls responded to?

### **Ambition and wholeheartedness: Revelation 3.14–22**

John, the author of this book, writes to various 'churches', meaning local gatherings of Christians. In this passage he addresses one of the churches of what is now western Turkey. Here in the city of Laodicea the believers meet in the house of someone called Nympha(s). It is a time of great persecution by the Roman Empire.

- Laodicea had hot springs that produced lukewarm water. John likens the Christians' faith to this, one that is neither hot nor cold. Most people in Cemetery Junction don't go to extremes in how they live – they remain very middle of the road. What are the advantages of this? So why does John criticise this kind of attitude?

*Stephen Brown is an Anglican priest, group trainer and internationally known authority on feature films. He regularly broadcasts, teaches and writes for the Church Times and others about films.*

*© Bible Society 2010. Permission is given to make up to ten copies for use within a single Reel Issues discussion group.*