



ANOTHER YEAR (Cert 12)

Overview: Four seasons in the life of a happily married couple who show hospitality to a circle of disparate family and friends – both strugglers and survivors.

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Director: Mike Leigh (2010)

Film Distributor: Momentum Pictures

Running time: 2 hr 5 minutes

Caution: Confronts infrequent swearing

SUMMARY OF PLOT

Tom (Jim Broadbent) and Gerri (Ruth Sheen) are happily married, enjoying life, their respective careers, their allotment and each other. They live comfortably in anonymous suburban London. The film charts a year in their life and their interaction at work, at home, with family and friends. Tom works as a geologist and Gerri is a Counsellor in a Doctors' surgery.

Each quarter of the film is set in one of the four seasons and begins with pictures of Tom and Gerri at their allotment. The couple are in the autumn of their own lives and have accumulated enough wisdom and experience to allow themselves to be completely at ease in one another's company. Their son Joe (Oliver Maltman) is single, lives on his own and works as a solicitor representing disadvantaged clients in tenancy disputes and the like.

Mary (Lesley Manville) is a secretary and a colleague of Gerri's. She is divorced and despite telling everyone she is very happy, she is desperate to be in a relationship and too easily turns to drink in search of consolation. Ken (Peter Wright) is an old friend of Tom's from university days. At a barbeque hosted by Tom and Gerri in honour of Ken's visit, Mary only has eyes for Joe whilst Ken is interested in Mary. Joe

remains pleasant but does not respond, Mary grows irritable with Ken.

Soon afterwards, Joe introduces Katie (Karina Fernandez) as his new girlfriend to Tom and Gerri. Mary is heartbroken and behaves rudely towards Katie which upsets Gerri especially.

Ronnie (David Bradley), Tom's brother, loses his wife and Tom, Gerri and Joe travel to Derby for the funeral where they encounter Ronnie's estranged son Carl (Martin Savage) whose angry outburst spoils the wake. Ronnie is persuaded to return to London with Tom and Gerri for a few days.

In a state of distress after another trauma, Mary turns up at Tom and Gerri's while they are out and persuades Ronnie to let her in. Gerri is not pleased to find Mary at home on her return from the allotment and Gerri tells her that she feels let down – her family is the most important thing to her. The film ends with the family around the meal table with Mary's growing realisation that in having lost Joe to Katie she has lost all hope and feels completely desolated.

SOME KEY ISSUES

Families and relationships – The story explores what it means to be family and presents a model of a stable nuclear family who are content and who seek to nurture the world they find themselves in. This theme is explored through Tom and Gerri's relationship with Joe and how they welcome Katie into the family. Family loyalty is also demonstrated in how Ronnie is supported through the loss of his wife. Relationships with Mary and Ken also provide the opportunity to explore themes of loyalty, support and regret.

Nurture and growth – The metaphor of the allotment is central to this story and depicts Tom and Gerri tilling, planting, fertilising, weeding, tending and

harvesting their crop. Their home is like the allotment and has nurtured Joe who seems well adjusted and making a valuable contribution to society. Mary, Ken and Ronnie are all in need of nurture but to receive it will require change on their part and each seems reluctant or unable to change.

Seasons – Each part of the film is set in one of the seasons as the year rolls around. Life too has its seasons and whilst Tom and Gerri are in the autumn of their lives, their ‘seed’ has produced new life in Joe and the potential for more life exists when he and Katie get together. This clearly brings pleasure and even greater contentment to Tom and Gerri. Mary, Ken and Ronnie’s lives appear barren and fruitless by comparison.

CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

Clip 1: DVD Chapter 2 15:09 – 16:51 (Approx. 2 minutes in length)

As Tom cooks supper, Gerri has time to check out the garden and tend to the plants in the conservatory. As they prepare to share a meal together the picture is one of contented togetherness. When they sit down to eat they review their day and share news about what they have been doing. This seems to be a regular feature of home life – each one interested in the life of the other.

In groups of four or five

- How realistic do you feel the picture of family life presented by Tom and Gerri is? How real do you feel their relationship is? When so many relationships break up and end in pain, is this simply an idealised view of how marriage could be?

- Do you like the way Tom and Gerri work out their relationship? When Hollywood constantly presents us with an endless stream of beautiful movie stars, Tom and Gerri are played by ‘ordinary people’ – what difference do you feel this makes to the way the story is told?

Whole group

- What positive characteristics of marriage do think Tom and Gerri portray? Can you identify any negative ones? Why?

Clip 2: DVD Chapter 3 21:10 – 27:32 (Approx. 6.5 minutes in length)

Mary has been invited around for a meal to Tom and Gerri’s. As the evening progresses Mary looks on in envy at Tom and Gerri’s relationship. Mary drinks too much and after supper fantasises about buying a car in which she could escape and pretend to be someone else. Mary then possibly fishes for an invitation to join Tom and Gerri on holiday in Ireland, but Tom and Gerri choose not to respond. Projecting her own need on Gerri, Mary hugs Gerri and tells her that if ever she needs someone to listen to her, Mary is available.

In pairs

- How does Mary make you feel? How might you have responded if you’d been Tom or Gerri?
- Tom and Gerri seem to take responsibility for their lives and plan accordingly. Mary appears to be aimless and very lonely. How much do you feel Mary may be to blame for her own circumstances and how much do you feel she is simply being a victim? Do you feel that Mary is unwilling or unable to take responsibility for her life?

- Do you think that Tom and Gerri should have invited Mary to go with them on holiday? Why?

Whole group

- What emotions do you think Tom, Gerri and Mary are displaying? How did they express themselves?

Clip 3: DVD Chapter 6 1:06:45 – 1:19:10 (Approx. 12.5 minutes in length)

Joe surprises Tom and Gerri by revealing his new girlfriend Katie – they have been together for two months. Katie immediately hits it off with Tom and Gerri who show the same welcoming hospitality to her that they have consistently shown to the other people in their life. Mary has been invited and turns up for tea warmly embracing Joe and then is shocked to meet Katie. Mary is rude and abrupt to Katie and this displeases Tom and Gerri who try to make light of it and continue the meal-table banter. After Joe and Katie leave, Mary tries to question Joe's wisdom in having Katie as a girlfriend.

In small groups

- What do you think about the way Joe introduced Katie to his parents? How would you describe the family relationships and way in which Tom and Gerri respond to Katie?
- Once or twice in the clip there is an awkward pause when folk aren't quite sure what to say next. This happens quite often when meeting someone new for the first time and you know that it's an important encounter. Have you ever been in a similar situation? How did it feel? Can you remember how you got out of the situation?

- How do you feel about the way in which Mary reacts to Katie and the way the family then respond to Mary?
- Katie seems to be everything Mary isn't – confident, charming, sympathetic. At the end of the clip Mary is creating another fantasy in which she sees Joe as having made a poor choice. What would you have said to Mary?

Clip 4: DVD Chapter 11 1:53:36 – 1:55:45 (Approx. 2 minutes in length)

Mary turns up at Tom and Gerri's in a depressed state and persuades Ronnie to let her in to wait. When Tom and Gerri return they are upset to discover Mary as Joe and Katie are due to visit soon. Gerri doesn't know what to do and after talking with Tom she decides to invite Mary to stay and eat with them, but the atmosphere is frosty. Gerri tells Mary that she let her down and that her family will always be the most important thing to her. Mary apologises and bursts into tears. Gerri tells Mary that she must take responsibility for her life.

In twos and threes

- Were Tom and Gerri right to invite Mary to stay? Why? What might you have done?
- Has anyone ever been in a similar situation? How did it feel?
- Why do you think Mary refuses to see a counsellor and take responsibility for herself and then uses avoidance tactics of seeking further consolation in a drink?
- Do you think Tom and Gerri are modelling a healthy way of being family? Why (not)?

Whole group

- How would you describe what Tom and Gerri did?
- Do you think this will serve as a wake-up call for Mary or do you think she is too set in her ways to change now?
- Would you like to know Tom and Gerri as friends? Why (not)?

GOD'S STORY

Families and relationships

Father, Son and Holy Spirit as Trinity present us with a picture of what it is to live in intimate relationship. The Bible offers us much guidance and instruction about how families should conduct themselves. Whilst a lot of this teaching is clearly for the times the passages were written in, many of the principles we know are good and have a life today as they are consistent with our understanding of God, his nature and what we think He wants for us.

Read Ephesians 5.21–33 and 1 Peter 3.1–7 These passages talk of a husband loving his wife in the same that Christ loved his bride, the Church. Tom and Gerri clearly have a respectful and loving relationship and although Gerri often takes the lead she still turns to Tom for reassurance and advice when things get tough. In what ways do you think Tom and Gerri's relationship follows the guidelines set out in these passages?

- What kind of example do you feel Joe gives us as Tom and Gerri's son? Have Tom and Gerri done a good job? Do you think they are good role models? Why (not)?
- What principles guide you in your relationships with your family and friends? Do you consciously

allow Christian teaching to influence the way you try to relate to people?

Read 1 Timothy 3.1–13 Those who are leaders in the Church seem to have to meet even higher standards relating to how they conduct their families. Do you think this is right? What do you think of the reasons Paul gives?

Nurture and growth

The story in this film is repeatedly anchored in the allotment and we see frequent images of Tom and Gerri bringing home their harvest and sharing meals around the table. In their professional lives, Tom and Gerri dig in the muck of other people's lives and then have to engage with the muck in the lives of friends and families. Whilst Tom and Gerri's lives bear fruit through their careers and son, Mary, Ken and Ronnie's lives seem to be fruitless. Do you think this is a fair assessment? Why (not)?

Read Galatians 5.22–26, 2 Corinthians 9.6–15 and 2 Peter 1.3–9 The Bible uses lots of metaphors (word pictures) for spiritual and agricultural fruitfulness but nearly always sets them within a context of generosity.

- In what ways are the pictures painted by the Bible similar to an allotment as a place where life is nurtured? What activities do we need to engage in to help our lives bear fruit? How good to you think you are at weeding and what do you use for fertiliser?
- The list of characteristics in the Galatians and 2 Peter passages seem pretty daunting. How can we help one another to build up our lives and keep exercising these characteristics so that they develop? What might a gym for characteristics look like?

Read Romans 5.1–4 – The writer of Romans clearly expects us to experience sufferings. Mary in particular seems to find it very easy to let things get her down when they go wrong, but this passage encourages us to use suffering to build perseverance which develops character and in turn produces hope.

- Of the main characters in the film, which would you say were characterised by hope and which were hopeless. Why? How hopeful do you feel?

Seasons

Since the Industrial Revolution and the urbanisation that it has brought, our lives have been less tied to the natural rhythms and cycles of the land. High speed transport means that our supermarkets have shelves filled with produce from around the globe all year round. If we choose to, we can buy fresh parsnips in June and enjoy salad in January! Do you think we have lost or gained by not keeping the seasons distinct any more? Why (not)?

Read Genesis 1.14, Ecclesiastes 3.1–14 – The seasons and their pattern are part of the created order that God has given to us. The verses from Ecclesiastes tell us that different activities have their own seasons.

- What do you think the author means by this?
- What do you think the different seasons of life might be and how are they characterised? How would you describe the seasons the characters in the film are living in – how would you characterise their lives? How would you describe your life and its season at the moment?

- There is much in this film about aging, mortality and the seeming fragility of life. In an earlier scene Ken reflects on how he notices how old he is getting and how much younger his colleagues appear to him. Ronnie has to face the sudden death of his wife and the funeral comes in winter when the landscape looks particularly bleak. How do you think we can balance enjoying today and making the most of life whilst recognising that the end will come one day with? What priorities should guide our life?

Read Psalm 104.19–26 – this passage describes a rhythm of life that is largely lost in our world today.

- Do you feel in any way that you resonate with the seasons and rhythms of the natural world?
- Readings and worship based on the lectionary provide spiritual seasons of the year. Have you ever been a church which followed this pattern? How did you feel? Did it help you to worship, did it add anything extra or was it a hindrance? Why?

Duncan Strathie is Ministry Training Officer with the Diocese of Winchester and regularly incorporates film in training programmes for lay people and ordained ministers. He is particularly interested in the impact of cinema on spirituality today and how people use film to try and find meaning. He regularly lectures on film and theology and leads courses and retreats exploring different themes in film.

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