



## THE KING'S SPEECH (Cert 12)

**Overview:** Oscar-winning drama following King George VI's battle to overcome his stammer and to lead a nation after his brother's abdication.

**Reel Issues author:** Stephen Brown

**Director:** Tom Hooper (2011)

**Studio:** Momentum Pictures

**Running time:** 113 minutes

**Caution:** Contains strong language in a speech therapy context

### SUMMARY OF PLOT

Wembley Stadium 1925. King George V's younger son, Prince Albert ('Bertie' to his family and played by Colin Firth), despite a bad stammer, tries to deliver a speech also being broadcast on radio. Having unsuccessfully engaged several speech therapists, his wife Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter) goes under an assumed name to request the services of an unconventional Australian therapist, Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush). Despite (or perhaps because) of Lionel's blunt manner, Bertie eventually submits to treatment. Sessions include talking intimately about Bertie's family background, something he is unused to. His elder brother, David's (Guy Pearce), playboy image sits awkwardly with being heir apparent. This worries the King (Michael Gambon) and Bertie. David becomes seriously involved with Mrs Simpson (Eve Best), a twice-married American and intends to wed her regardless of potential conflict with his imminent succession to the throne in 1936. He abdicates within months, leaving an unwilling but dutiful brother to take over. Bertie (publicly known as King George VI) is now dramatically confronted with perfecting his

speech. This is aggravated by the need to rally a nation facing great economic depression and probably a second world war within decades of the previous one which had claimed millions of lives. Lionel acts as Bertie's coach, culminating in a crucial broadcast at the onset of war in 1939 which the King successfully delivers.

### SOME KEY ISSUES

**The challenge of responsibility** – Greatness is thrust upon Bertie who had never expected to be replacing his elder brother on the throne. Although terrified at the prospect (especially because of his stammer), he isn't prepared to take any option other than fulfil this responsibility.

**Friendship** – The Royal Family of that time seems to have major difficulties in showing affection. On the other hand, Bertie and Lionel both enjoy warm home lives which enable them (once royal formalities are overcome) to build a friendship that allows the relationship between client and therapist to work. It's through friendship that Bertie can rise to the challenge of succeeding his brother.

**Overcoming/living with our limitations** –The therapist's directness and unusual methods help the prince identify possible causes of his impediment which are linked to his upbringing. Learning to acknowledge these becomes a factor in Bertie sufficiently overcoming his limitations to function well as king.

**Conflicts of interest** – Most of the royalty put their duties before any personal desires. David questions this order of priorities. Bertie, on the other hand, has been fortunate in marrying someone whose loving support doesn't conflict with but facilitates his sense of duty.

## CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

### Clip 1 (DVD chapter 3)

Elizabeth takes her husband to meet Lionel. A small boy overcoming a stammer greets them before Bertie is ushered into the consultation room. There follows an exploratory conversation which oversteps several boundaries of protocol: Lionel addresses the prince by his family name, forbids him to smoke and plays loud music while Bertie tries to read aloud into a recording machine.

#### *Small groups discussion and feedback*

- Is Lionel right to lay down his own rules about how another person (let alone a prince) should behave or be addressed? What would have been his reasons for insisting on these?
- How do you handle yourself in situations where there might be issues about equality and authority? How informal or intimate are you prepared to be? Would you address royalty in the way Lionel does?
- What's the personal chemistry between the men in this scene, one which is not without its humorous element?
- There are issues of equality, the delicacy of enquiring into the prince's early life, displays of temper then a playful wager. Which of these lead to a meeting of minds and which are points of divergence?

### Clip 2 (DVD chapter 5)

George V is bewildered and dying. David sees this as deliberate sabotage to his plans to marry Wallis Simpson. Bertie reasons with him. His mother scolds David for being late for dinner. The Archbishop of

Canterbury (Derek Jacobi), sitting next to him, attempts to affirm David's different characteristics from those of his father. Then George V dies. Bertie weeps on his mother's shoulder. She holds him awkwardly. Bertie tries to have a conversation with David about the future. Meanwhile Lionel is having fun doing Shakespearean turns with his boys.

#### *In pairs*

- What are the variety of reactions shown by those present at the death of George V? Any guesses as to what is going on under the surface for them? What's stopping them from displaying full emotions?
- Contrast Lionel's family life with that of the Royals. What is different?
- What evidence is there in the film for seeing David as both a weak and strong character by pursuing different aims from those of his father?
- Did David, in your view, make the right decision to abdicate and marry rather than be king? Was he secretly relieved that he had an excuse not to take on the awesome responsibilities as head of the British Empire? Or was he at his strongest in choosing to take the path he did?
- Can you think of occasions when you have been faced with (or dread that you might in the future have to face) an unnerving challenge or responsibility, one which conflicts with your natural preferences? What did/ would you choose?

### Clip 3 (DVD chapter 9)

Westminster Abbey. The Archbishop is supervising preparations for the coronation when Bertie arrives and introduces Lionel. The Archbishop clearly disapproves. Furthermore Bertie and Lionel insist on

having the place to themselves for a rehearsal. On their own, Bertie reveals that he knows Lionel has no qualifications in speech therapy but nevertheless they continue with their rehearsal.

### *Buzz session*

- Each of the three main characters in this scene has their authority questioned in some way. Can you describe this?
- Some of the conflicts are transformed into win–win solutions. What needed to be present for this to be brought about? Can you provide experiences when you or someone else has reconciled opposing positions in an amicable way?
- The Archbishop leaves the Abbey upset at how things have gone. What principles or expectations is he holding onto that make him only accept the king's wishes with bad grace? If you were his friend or counsellor how would you best help him?
- The new king appears relaxed when rehearsing with Lionel. What sort of things ease the situation for him?

### **Clip 4 (DVD chapter 11)**

An august body of Establishment figures have gathered for Bertie's national broadcast at the start of World War II. First Sea Lord, Winston Churchill (Timothy Spall) confides to the King that he too has a speech impediment. Lionel acts like the conductor of an orchestra (the music is from Beethoven's 7th Symphony) throughout the delivery. 'Say it to me as friend' he tells him. Bertie rises to the occasion and makes a nine minute speech. Afterwards Bertie addresses him as 'his friend' followed by acknowledging an enthusiastic crowd from the balcony of Buckingham Palace.

- Why do you think so many dignitaries had to be present when the King broadcasted? Was it encouraging or intimidating?
- What effect, if any, would Churchill's chat have had on Bertie's performance? Does it really help someone to share an similar experience of one's own?
- Earlier in the film, Lionel utters a throwaway line 'What are friends for?' to which Bertie replies 'I wouldn't know'. Do you think he does now? And, if so, what has happened to make that so?
- Throughout the delivery of the speech Lionel acts like the conductor of an orchestra (the music is from Beethoven's 7th Symphony). Is there a fine line between encouraging another and manipulating them? What are your own positive and negative experiences of being 'helped' by somebody?

### **GOD'S STORY**

We hear in these Bible readings of theological qualms about monarchy, how our defects can be turned to good effect and that being open to God precedes being healed.

#### **Leadership and responsibility – 1 Samuel 8**

The Old Testament writer is sceptical (see also Deuteronomy 17) about the value to Israel of having a king like other nations around them. Will he not oppress them rather than be God's servant? The ageing Samuel has no obvious heirs and successors to continue his work as a judge rather than a monarch. Reluctantly he takes steps to appoint one, choosing Saul as king.

- George VI is a reluctant king, if only for personal reasons. Is this Bible passage suggesting that it is kind neither to monarch nor subjects to place so much power and responsibility on one person?
- God's fears, given the experience of neighbouring countries, that a king would exercise leadership in exploitative and oppressive ways are confirmed when Saul deviates from what the Lord has decreed. Samuel proclaims that he is no longer God's anointed (1 Samuel 13.14) but favours David instead. What godly qualities of leadership and responsibility does this biblical passage look for in a king?
- In this passage the people of Israel are seen as rejecting the word of the Lord in demanding a king. Israel's subsequent social history, of course, continues to include the appointment of kings. Do you think God comes over the years to see the monarchy as a good thing after all? Or does he, as with other aspects of human behaviour, forever strive to transform our arrangements into something more worthy?
- What do you think makes the people so insistent on having a king? What needs do they see it as meeting? What does a king represent for them?
- Paul saw his 'thorn' as something visited on him by Satan's messenger. Yet if it was given to him, as he claims, in order to take him down a necessary peg or two is this interpretation likely to be the correct one? What other explanations could there be for him having this complaint?
- Bertie regarded his stammer as a curse, not as a corrective against getting too high and mighty. What 'blessings', if any, could St Paul's way of thinking have pointed out to someone with Bertie's condition?
- The Bible is full of examples (Moses' speech, Gideon's lowly social position, Peter's character defects) of God enabling people to overcome their limitations. Can you give examples from experience of living with or rising beyond your own limitations? How was this achieved?
- St Paul prayed (and perhaps Bertie did too) for relief from his complaint. He didn't get this but admits to receiving something greater. What is being referred to in verses 9 and 10 of this passage? Perhaps it would be appropriate to end this section by reading and discussing:

**A confederate soldier's prayer:**

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;  
 I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.  
 I asked for health, that I might do greater things;  
 I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.  
 I asked for riches, that I might be happy;  
 I was given poverty, that I might be wise.  
 I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;  
 I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.  
 I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;

**Overcoming/living with limitations – 2 Corinthians 12. 7–10**

St Paul had some kind of disability, ailment or social disadvantage which he describes as 'a thorn in the flesh'. It has been variously suggested that this could have been an ailment like epilepsy, disfigurement, bad temper or perhaps a speech impediment.

I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I  
hoped for.  
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were  
answered.  
I am among all men most richly blessed.

### Healing – Mark 7. 31–37

A crowd beseeches Jesus to put his hand on a deaf man with a speech impediment. Aside in private he heals him. Jesus uses the word 'Ephphatha' which means 'Be opened'.

- Jesus doesn't make any reference to the curing of deafness or speech but calls upon Heaven that this man be opened. Opened to what? In the film, Bertie has despaired of being healed and isn't open to tackling his condition in new ways, ones that may release him. What first needs to be overcome before healing can occur?
- What's the difference between being cured and being healed? Would you say Bertie is never entirely cured of his stammer but is certainly healed? In what ways might overcoming a disability be linked to praying we change the things we can, accept the things we can't and have the wisdom to know the difference?
- What spiritual advantages might lie in being hesitant in speech where you have to think very carefully before you open your mouth, find ways of saying things that can be understood and need to employ delaying tactics while you form your words?
- Could this passage be seen as some kind of enacted parable about people who have ears deaf to God's word with mouths unable to speak of the glory of God? Jesus' prayer is that Heaven be opened to the one who is deaf and dumb. What

helps people be open to life in all its fullness? Give examples.

### Friendship – John 15.11–17

Jesus outlines true friendship. It is depicted as a love greater than can be imagined. It is the sort that Jesus has for his disciples, one that reflects God's love for us all.

- The transition in the relationship between Jesus and the disciples comes about when he no longer regards them as 'servants' but as friends. That is because he has completely opened himself up to them. What parallels can you draw between this Bible passage and the end of The King's Speech when Bertie feels able to call Lionel his friend?
- Unlike our family, we can choose our friends. Jesus is selective about those he classifies as friends. What are our criteria? What do we expect from our friends? What do we give them?
- Jesus' type of friendship isn't a clinging sort of thing. He entrusts them to go out and find ways of sharing who they are and what they stand for. When are we tempted to be possessive of friends? How is this overcome?
- Jesus in calling them friends expects a loving response from his disciples. Lionel ultimately draws out of Bertie such a reaction. We are bidden to love one another to the point of self-sacrifice. If love changes everything, what examples can you give where it has empowered you to do something you'd otherwise have thought impossible?
- Joy is seen in this passage as something that occurs even when accompanied by pain when it is shared in total giving. Lionel is temporarily rejected by Bertie but keeps his door open should the king

decide to re-engage with him. How do you deal with rejection? How well can you stay open to possible reconciliation? What helps you to do so?

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