

Review – Dead Man Walking

§1 Introduction

One of the best things a film can do is make us reflect on the various convictions and beliefs which we hold through the course of our daily lives. In this light it must be said that the film, *Dead Man Walking*, is rich in both theological and philosophical material for this very examination. This is important since in our contemporary entertainment culture - our world of iPods and Xboxes - there is precious little of this examination taking place. With that in mind I want to review this film, at least from a Christian perspective, in order to outline what I feel are the main themes of the picture, and perhaps to get us to think about what they mean, and how these themes speak to us in the narrative of our daily lives.

Dead Man Walking, while it purports to be a fictional tale, is nonetheless based on the book by one of the central characters, the nun Sister Helen – played by Susan Sarandon. The book itself is a reflection upon Sister Helen's real life experiences and therefore the film could be considered to be a docudrama or maybe historical fiction. The nature of the docudrama genre is important, because unlike a lot of contemporary films, this movie is very much grounded in human experience, it comments on real life, on its tragedies and on some of the deeper and more elusive aspects on what it means to be human. In this film Sister Helen comes to be the spiritual adviser of a man condemned to death for committing the heinous crime of rape and murder. In keeping with a docudrama the film doesn't pull any punches - this is after all the age of being graphic, with our CSI's and Law & Order's, it shows the atrocities committed from a number of perspectives and in full graphic force. The offender, Matthew Poncelet, superbly played by Sean Penn, is initially seen as something of a superficial character, a tough boy playing monster. When you first encounter Matthew in this

film he is seen through a wire mesh that obscures his features. This is a deliberate film making technique, and the director, Tim Robbins uses it very purposefully. As the movie progresses his character becomes clearer, both to the camera and to the viewer in being revealed as a deeper, more meaningful human being as the defensive layers shrouding his true nature are revealed. It is after all, easier to burn an ogre than a human being, and this remains a key theme throughout the picture. This brings to mind a popular ogre who goes by the name of 'Shrek'. *Schreck* is German for 'fright' or 'scare' and is often translated into English as 'terror.' Initially in the Shrek movie, the humans all want Shrek dead, merely because he frightens them. From memory the local villages all attack him with pitchforks and flaming torches and other implements all in a mobbed frenzy intending to put Shrek out of action. As the film progresses though we get to see a more human side of Shrek as his friendship with the donkey allows him to peel off the onion layers that surround his self. In *Dead Man Walking*, the donkey that befriends the terror is Sister Helen, but unlike Shrek who is merely a cartoon, Matthew has done some genuinely wicked things. Various parties within the film attempt to reduce Matthew to the simplistic caricature of the ogre – after all it makes it easier to give him the poison pill - but Sister Helen resists this temptation and instead attempts to redeem something from the character of Matthew prior to his inevitable demise.

§ How to approach a review?

The five hundred pound elephant sitting in the corner, at least with respect to any commentary on this film, is of course – the death penalty and the moral debate that surrounds it. It is debateable about which side the film takes, with some reviewers suggesting that it takes neither. I would argue that it leans towards being against the penalty and there are a number of reasons for this as we shall see. Certainly, back in the real world, Sister Helen heads up a group opposed to the death penalty, and real life partners Susan Sarandon and Tim

Robbins are opposed as well. On the affirmative side in the film though we see the priest voicing his opinion for the death penalty to Sister Helen, as well as the parents of the victims. On the abolitionists side we really only find Sister Helen, who has to somehow negotiate the minefields that await her in attempting to redeem something from the character of Matthew. Nobody wants to redeem Matthew, or for that matter even contemplate whether there is anything to redeem. Just how far does redemption extend, is there something in even the most evil of creatures that has some measure of worth? Now this is a great question...

In this day and age whereby the postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion have come to the fore, in other words, we judge – correctly in my opinion – the truth of a person’s statements by their psychological motives; the question naturally arises as to what are my views on the death penalty. Well, in order to be fair to the listener, I will reveal this at the end of this review, for two reasons. Firstly, the death penalty happens to be one of those issues that can really polarise people, and if I state it now it may very well affect how you listen to the rest of what I have to say and you may miss some important notion. Secondly, I do not think that the death penalty is the main theme of the film, or perhaps even within the top three themes of the film. Instead there are a number of other items that I want to bring in to focus from a Christian perspective. In particular, and this may surprise you, but I feel that the main theme of the film is Christian love and perhaps love more generally. What is love? How does it work and how does Sister Helen portray it? These are the most important questions that the film raises, and it does so by considering how our concepts of justice, fairness, forgiveness and the possibility of atoning for one’s wickedness all fit in with this overall idea of love. For this reason this movie is extremely relevant to this day because the Christian message found in the atoning work of Christ on the Cross really does have something to say to this world about the relationship between justice and love.

§ What is love?

The opening song to the movie is called ‘The Face of Love’ and was composed for this picture by a Pakistani musician with the lyrics penned by the director Tim Robbins. I know this because I have access to the Dvd audio commentary whereby Robbins outlines his goal for the film. What is love is the question that he wants to ask. There is another major question that he wants to ask, but we’ll get to that. For now defining love seems easy enough. We think we all know what love is, but as this film points out, love turns out to be quite the conundrum. Just what is it, and why is it so elusive and enigmatic? Marriage might sound like a funny place to consider the nature of justice, but let’s think about it for a second. It was once famously said, by Nietzsche of all people, that ‘When marriage becomes about love, then marriage ceases to have any meaning at all.’ Now what could that possibly mean, ‘when marriage becomes about love it ceases to have any meaning at all?’ It seems to suggest that love could destroy marriage? It is an interesting and provocative comment, but consider, if marriage were to be about love, then surely this would create an absurdity. If I love my motor bike then I could rightly marry it, as people have, or as Dennis Rodman once famously did, one could waltz down to the local church and marry themselves! Growing up in this society within which we now live, love has come to be associated with eros, with pure sentiment and affection. The brilliance of this film is to consider how this view of love - a view of love based on affection - actually stands up within the context of the real world. Our more modern concept of marriage, whereby anybody can marry anything perhaps finds its roots with the French troubadours in the seventeenth century rather than in any traditional Judeo/Christian conception. Likewise, when we talk about love, then what type of love are we talking about? Which definition of love do we mean? How does this type of love work in the face of incomprehensible violence and pain? A common question found in the Western World, where this enlightenment view of love exists, is “if a loving God created the world,

then how come he allows such evil? I'll take it for granted that evil and injustice exist, and exist to a level that I could not even comprehend from experience, but the real question to explore is; what do we mean by 'a loving God?'

§ What is justice?

From a Christian perspective how are we to respond to the horrendous acts committed by Matthew as portrayed in this film? Really this is just a particular redressing of the question of evil in general and it is a question that arises because of a particular set of circumstances. One can easily imagine a world where God exists but doesn't have very much to do with human beings, and whilst humans are suffering, the Gods can run amok and do as they please. The question of evil and God's existence doesn't arise in this particular context. This was the worldview of the ancient Greeks, and is still the worldview of most of the planet today. The question that arises in the Western world - and the Western world being the minority view - comes about because we have a notion that God is good, and that because he is good, he is therefore worthy of being worshipped. After all if God were bad, then he would not be worthy of worship, even if it explained the very existence of the world, if it fitted the facts as such. Now, one has to wonder whether this question is even a valid proposition, but philosophical dilemmas aside, when many people consider the vicious acts as portrayed in this film, God is dismissed. How could a loving God allow such a thing? Surely if God is all-loving then he could have actively prevented it. But this presupposes a particular type of love, a type of love that has a particular view of justice. This film discusses the inadequacy of this presupposed type of love and explores just what love might be in the context of the real world. This inadequacy is demonstrated in the breakdown of the marriage of one of the victims parents, it questions whether justice can be achieved for those who have suffered and it questions whether such offenders can be loved. How far and deep does love

go? Can we love the unlovable? Is everyone capable of love and how does love fare in the face of great suffering and violence? Can love overcome vengeance and what place does law and justice have within love's scope? These are tough questions, but could they be questions of any greater importance?

§ What is evil?

These questions are then further compounded when we consider the nature of evil. Evil is often considered to be some kind of force, some kind of entity that is attached to certain beings and not to others. It makes it easy for us to understand why murderers kill and why we do not – they are simply overcome by this entity of evil, it has somehow possessed them. Ah they have this property of evil – and that explains that. Justice then simply becomes about removing this entity of evil from this world, via execution or jail time or some other remedy. The problem with this is that when confronting the source of this supposed evil, what we find is usually quite banal. When Adolf Eichmann was arrested and tried in Israel and then executed in 1962 for his part in the Holocaust, Eichmann expressed his lament that the one great regret of his life was that he didn't make full Colonel. He was an average citizen trying to impress his superiors. He was a man who was missing some essential faculty rather than being possessed by some evil entity. Ordinary people are capable of incredible atrocities. What was Matthew Poncelet's evil? He was a chicken. He succumbed to peer pressure, and the desire to attain the attention of his friend. His friends were a bad influence, and in pursuing his need for approval he committed some horrible acts and destroyed the lives of a young couple, a marriage and he also broke the heart of his mother. Matthew lacked something, he lacked true friends, he lacked anyone who really loved him and his isolation led him down a dark path, a very dark path indeed. Matthew's evil; he lacked love.

§ What does it mean to be redeemed?

What does our modern view of love say to this scenario, shall we live and let live? All of a sudden this film finds that view of love inadequate and defective. For love to work it also has to somehow redeem something from Matthew and somehow to atone for the damage that he caused. But how to do this? Sister Helen's approach is to get Matthew to find his true nature and to repent of his wickedness. Perhaps if Matthew can find his true self and be sorry for his wrong doings then he can be changed, be reborn into someone who is no longer a danger to society. Perhaps a process of reflection can bring about a new Matthew as he casts off his old nature and takes on a new one, a new one that is formed within the community of love that he shares with Sister Helen. At the end of the film we see a radiant Matthew, a Matthew who is flooded by the forgiveness of God and bubbling over with the love of Sister Helen and with the love from his now changed heart. In the context of community Matthew has found some redemption, some rehabilitation, and he is no longer a danger to society, but rather a loving caring, fully fledged human being.

But somehow this really doesn't cut it, does it? What about the lives that he destroyed, about the communities that he fractured and about the pain that he inflicted? How can it be fair that Matthew can be redeemed and face no punishment for his crimes, even if he is no longer that person who committed those atrocities? There is something about the cry of human justice that is found in all of us, that somehow we all have this faint dream that justice might be possible. Tom Wright raises this very question in his excellent work *Simply Christian*. He identifies a dream condition within human beings, a dream whereby we all can conceive of a world where there is true justice. In other words, the cry for justice is a human condition, we all share it, we all desire it, and we are all really quite aware of what right and what wrong is, from a very early age. Justice is a language that we all speak, as is the innate

language of love. Sounds very Chomskian doesn't it. The trouble comes, as Tom Wright points out, that justice and love are elusive, they are something exists at the core of the human condition but that seem out of our reach, unattainable in their fullest. Tom argues that the Gospel is the narrative that speaks to this condition. The languages of justice, love, right and wrong, redemption and salvation are common across the human range of experience. We all have them, both believer and non-believer alike, we cannot deny them. What makes sense of these languages that we have? What makes sense of the human condition?

The famous atheist Bertrand Russell, in his book, *What I Believe*, states that one of his great objections to Christianity is that the Gospel forces a type of individualism. I believe that his criticism has some merit, particularly in Protestant circles. Over the years we have tended to view salvation as being about the soul going to heaven while the body dies off. Or another way of looking at it is to say that it is about the individual making a choice that is to secure their soul a ticket in the afterlife. We might say "have you ever stolen a ruler, or a pen", to which if we get an affirmative, we might say "well then, you are off to hell unless you repent and allow Jesus into your heart." Russell thinks that this approach is actually injurious to the human condition and to an extent I agree. This is nihilistic, it is emptying human experience of its content by shifting life's meaning and value from our present circumstances to heaven. It is a type of salvation that doesn't do anything beyond preserving the individual. Now, I guess that this was rather Nietzsche's complaint than that of Russell, and neither Nietzsche nor Russell were nihilists but they certainly thought that Christianity was. That Christianity is nihilistic is a theme that the director Tim Robbins discusses in his audio commentary at the point whereby Matthew begins his confession. What I particularly like about this film is that it portrays salvation and redemption in a much more positive and thoughtful light. If Christianity is to be defended against the charges of nihilism by Russell, then we need to ask what is it that needs to be saved and redeemed? In this film the moral damage extends to just

about everyone. The concern isn't solely with the state of Matthew's soul but with the entire interaction of community. A soul being saved and flying off to heaven hardly fixes the damage down on planet earth. The late German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a great place to start since in his *Ethik* he was responding directly to Nietzsche's charge that the Christian faith is nihilistic. This is particularly important since there is a great voice making these charge today, whether it's Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens or any other of the dozens of acolytes of the new-atheism. Bonhoeffer claimed that "Christ is only present in the community" and held that faith is not a solo affair between God and you but rather salvation and redemption is something that is worked out in the context of community. This is most evident in the way that Matthew and Sister's Helen's relationship developed over the course of the film. 'Love changes things' is Sister Helen's statement and we see this play out to the point that by the end of the film Matthew has completely changed as a character. Sister Helen could have stopped her message after getting Matthew to pray, to accept God's forgiveness and he was happy that God would save him. Many of us as Christians would stop right there. Redemption isn't a free ticket because Jesus died for our sins, it is not about that, and in fact that is ultimately not terribly helpful. For redemption to occur Matthew has to find a truth within himself, a truth about himself, a truth that he has to share with the community. He has to take responsibility for who he is and for the wrong doing in which we all share, and only then is redemption really possibly amongst the community. This however, coincides with Matthews death and it is here that the film challenges another important aspect of community, that of the implementation of justice. The community in which we live is required to love and respect the dignity of persons, but it is also required to implement justice. What the film wants to show is that there is something harmful done to the gaoler who has to implement this justice. Who gets to kill Matthew and what effect does killing Matthew have upon that who is attempting to implement justice? In the film the priest uses

the bible, which he views as being an infallible document to justify the killing of Matthew. Many things are done in the name of love, and the name of God, and Sister Helen puts us as well as the jailers to task. Could we see Jesus pulling the switch on the electric chair or releasing the hangman's noose? It is a compelling question isn't it. In the Old Testament we see a God who does pull the switch on humanity, and in the New Testament we see the switch pulled on Him. What do we make of this? Devising a Gospel message that reaches into this aspect of 'Christ in community' is a much needed and neglected task, but alas a task for a theologian. Since I am more of a philosopher than a theologian, I'll leave that for someone better qualified. But let us ask ourselves, we all share the basic datum, we all dream of justice, we all need love; doesn't God intervening into history as a Christ dying upon a cross speak to this language, to this archetype in a more meaningful way that a moral faculty arises in us by random chance? Sure, it's only a partial solution, since the fullness of salvation isn't until resurrection, and sure, atheists can lead a very meaningful life without the need for a god as such, many do. But I would suggest that Christian narrative makes the most sense of human experience and the purpose of life. Ah, the starry heavens above me, and the moral law within me... what can we say to that!

§ The Death Penalty revised.

One of Tim Robbin's major questions for this film was 'who has the right to kill?' He wants to say no one, and indeed does through Matthew's voice at the end but does he convince. Well, I said that I would comment on my position on the death penalty, so you can pass judgement, not that you have to agree with me at all. For many years I was against the death penalty, it seemed cruel in our "enlightened" society. Two years ago I changed my mind, mainly through the influence of Saint Thomas Aquinas and his master work Summa

Theologiae and the anti-enlightenment thinker Michel Foucault and his work entitled *Discipline and Punish*. Probably a big factor as well is that I am a post-modern, and like most post-moderns I have a very pessimistic view of human behaviour. My arguments are too complex to go into here, but you can go and research these sources if you so care to do so. A good starting point would be the Catholic Church's catechism. Saying all of this, the times that I would implement it would be extremely rare with an extensive set of conditions that would need to be reached for it to go ahead. To cut to the chase, do I agree with the execution of Matthew Poncelet? In short, Yes. What do you think? Saying that it's easier to assent to something than it is to do it, so I ask, would I pull the switch, would you pull the switch? What if I was the offender, would I have someone pull the switch on me. That's an easier one, but would Jesus pull the switch on me? Not so easy to answer is it, and now I feel like Moses wandering as a judge in the desert... Justice is as elusive as love. We could spend a lifetime trying to understand these things and still not get it, and they are great questions for us all, both believer and non-believer alike.

§ That's a wrap...

Dead Man Walking deals with all the big questions of evil, justice, and love while realising that these are difficult and elusive concepts which we may never solve. The Christian story tells us that we are all dead men walking. Everyman has to die, that is the script that we are running with. We are both blessed by a loving God and cursed by the same God. Our sentence is death, it is written in the stars. In more recent times theologians have tended to argue from Plantinga's freewill argument for the defence of a loving God allowing such misery. This argument, I will put to you, is fatally flawed. Instead I tend to look at the story that is being formed by the Christian narrative. A living God intervenes in history in order to bring about an aesthetic purpose for humanity. In our contemporary world we are

faced with two choices, a random meaningless worldview whereby the cosmos is an accident and we are forced to make something of ourselves amidst the ugliness of arbitrary suffering. We can contrast this with a world that is alive with prospect, love and hope. I would argue that it is simply curmudgeonly to select the former, so, I choose the latter.

Recommended Reading:

Prejean Helen, 1996, *Dead Man Walking*, Zondervan.

Schaeffer Francis A., 1998, *The God Who Is There*, InterVarsity Press, Illinois.

Wright N.T., 2006, *Evil and the Justice of God*, IVP Books.

Wright N.T., 2006, *Simply Christian*, HarperOne.

Questions to consider:

1. Can love ever really allow us to forgive those who have meted out unspeakable harm?
2. Is capital punishment really a form of playing God, or are we forced to play God either way?
3. Are we redeemed through the Gospel individually, or is salvation something that is worked out in the context of community?