



Doubt

Richard Blakely

Seeing in black and white

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Film title: Doubt

Director: John Patrick Shanley

Screenplay: John Patrick Shanley (based on his own play)

Starring: Meryl Streep, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams, Viola Davis

Distributor: Miramax Films (USA); Walt Disney (UK)

DVD Release date: 7 April 2009 (USA); 6 Jul 2009 (UK)

Certificate: 12 December 2008 (USA); 6 February 2009 (UK) Contains theme of implied child sexual abuse

[Image]

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'What do you do when you're not sure?' Father Brendan Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman) opens his sermon with a question which underlies the plot of the entire film. Writer/director John Patrick Shanley, who also wrote the play on which the film is based, recounts the motivations behind his work:

I decided to write a play that celebrated the fact that you can never know anything for certain. I wanted to explore the idea that doubt has an infinite nature, that it allows for growth and change, whereas certainty is a dead-end.

The story follows Sister Aloysius Beauvier (Meryl Streep), the strict principal of St Nicholas's School,

as she investigates her suspicions about Father Flynn's relationship with the school's only African-American student, Donald Miller (Joseph Foster). Sister Aloysius is convinced that Father Flynn is guilty of taking advantage of a lost and lonely child, but he vehemently argues his innocence. Caught in the middle is Sister James (Amy Adams). She is a young, naïve teacher who witnesses unsettling hints at what might be going on, but remains uncertain. Sister Aloysius is willing to go to any lengths to expose Father Flynn, but she has no proof to justify her convictions. Shanley intentionally left the ending ambiguous, which resonates with the theme and title of the movie. *'The audience would decide for themselves what their ending is,'* he explains.

The film is set in 1964, the year after the Kennedy Assassination. It was a time of change, both in society in general and in the church. Lyndon B. Johnson took the presidency after Kennedy and initiated a series of reforms known as 'The Great Society' programme. It was, among other things, a fight against poverty and racial injustice. Also around that time (1962-65) Pope John XXIII called a council, known as Vatican II, to re-evaluate the position of the Roman Catholic Church in modern society. Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn represent conflicting views on how the church should function. She belongs to a more conservative school of thought, perceiving the church as separate from society at large and in need of retaining that dividing line. He, on the other hand, concurs with the changes being debated at the Vatican II. He says, *'The Church needs to change,'* and reinforces that thought by suggesting that they should try to be friendlier towards parishioners. The conflict between them leads Sister James to believe that Sister Aloysius's opinions of Father Flynn have clouded her judgment on this matter.

Philip Seymour Hoffman explains that, *'at heart, the story is not really about the church at all but about human beings in general. Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius could be anyone in any setting.'* The church setting throws into even starker relief an already serious situation. Father Flynn, if he were guilty, would be betraying the church that he represents. Sister Aloysius clings to a black-and-white view of reality, and in her mind there is no room for doubt and uncertainty. The hints before her convince her of Father Flynn's guilt, and

nothing he says is going to change her mind.

Father Flynn defends himself with words like 'love' and 'compassion', both of which are clearly right and are important to demonstrate. But if Sister Aloysius's accusations are true, then Father Flynn is twisting and corrupting the definition of love. He believes that he cares about Donald more than Sister Aloysius. But true care for someone is defined by Jesus as a selfless love (John 15:13), whereas to take advantage of someone who is lonely and suffering is a selfish love. It is not healthy and it is not the way that God meant for love to be shown between two people. If Father Flynn is guilty, then he is using Donald's pain for his own gratification, which is reprehensible in any situation, but more so here, where the perpetrator is an adult in a position of responsibility and the victim is a child whom he is supposed to be caring for.

In one scene, Sister Aloysius requests Donald's mother (Viola Davis) to come in to the school. When she voices her suspicions about the relationship between Father Flynn and Donald, Mrs Miller's reaction is not what she was expecting. Instead of shock at what could be happening to her son, Mrs Miller accepts the situation with resignation, but refuses to take her son out of the situation. She is aware that Donald's sexual preferences are outside the heterosexual norm of the time. This is one of the reasons that Mr Miller beats his son and would do so again if Donald had to be removed from St Nicholas's. Mrs Miller contrasts Father Flynn with everyone else, seeing him as the only person who is treating Donald with any sort of kindness. So when weighing up the pros and cons, she opts to keep Donald at St Nicholas's until he finishes in June, after which he will be able to go to a good high school and later college. Thus, unable to remove Donald from the threat of Father Flynn, Sister Aloysius determines to remove the threat of Father Flynn from Donald Miller. She pursues her goal with intensity, and succeeds in ousting Father Flynn from St Nicholas's. But she has no hard evidence to prove her conviction to anyone besides herself. If her suspicions are unfounded then her behaviour towards Father Flynn is hardly commendable. She drives him from the parish with a threat of ruining his reputation. If Father Flynn is innocent, and she is merely misinterpreting his compassionate nature towards

a boy who has been sidelined by the other students in the school, then she is living up to the impression we get of her in her first scene. Perhaps she is truly a cruel and paranoid woman who sees scandals where there are none.

Like Sister James, we find ourselves in a position between Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn, trying to sort out truth from untruth. Like her, we at first believe that Father Flynn is guilty. But as she talks to him, and he is given the opportunity to present his side of the story, we begin to doubt our certainty. The issue is confused by the introduction of the possibility that he might, after all, be innocent. It is so easy to believe the worst of people, despite the evidence being circumstantial. How often do we stop to gather all the evidence before pronouncing judgment upon someone? Is it our responsibility to pass judgment? If we see a situation where one person may be wronging another, then, yes, it is important to intervene in that situation to stop the wrongdoing from taking place and to prevent it occurring again. Where someone's reputation is involved, however, without solid evidence that they are in fact transgressing, then perhaps a measure of grace should be observed.

In Matthew 18:5-6, Jesus outlines the right way for adults to treat children. The principles he states can be applied to the situation with Father Flynn. He first explains that it is good to welcome a child; it is good to show them compassion and love, and to care for their needs. Father Flynn asserts to Sister James that this is the extent of his relationship with Donald, and he explains it in such a way that we are able to consider the possibility that he may be telling the truth. Jesus goes on to warn against causing a child to stumble. He tells his disciples that, *'it would be better for [them] to have a large millstone tied around [their] neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea.'* If Sister Aloysius is right, however, then Father Flynn falls into the latter category described by Jesus, and he should not be allowed to get away with it.

The Bible also provides instruction on dealing with the wrongdoing of others. Paul warns the Corinthian church that we all are guilty of sin, and that when the Lord returns he will be the one to judge each person on what they have done (1 Corinthians 4:5). Therefore Sister Aloysius,

though she was right to try to protect Donald, was wrong in seeking to destroy Father Flynn. God tells people time and time again throughout the Bible that it is he who is responsible for judging every individual. Though we each have done things that hurt God, he chooses to show mercy to those who accept his son Jesus Christ as their Lord and saviour. Therefore it is not up to us to demand punishment for someone else. Though we might like to deny it, we are all guilty of rebelling against God (Romans 3:23), so none of us has the right to judge others as being more guilty than ourselves. Jesus addresses precisely the issue of judging one another (Luke 6:37-42), warning us against condemning others and encouraging forgiveness. Despite being a nun, Sister Aloysius seems to have glossed over this passage in her pursuit of what she believes to be right. Determining someone's guilt on negligible evidence stands in stark contrast to the message that Jesus was teaching here. It's something we all need to pay attention to.

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