



THE BLIND SIDE (Cert 12)

Directed by: John Lee Hancock

Running time: 123 minutes

SUMMARY

The Blind Side tells the true story of Michael Oher (Quinton Aaron), a homeless, black teenager taken in and adopted by rich, white family, the Tuohys. While the film explores Michael's broken background and healing process after a lifetime of emotional deprivation, the story is at least as much about the journey the Tuohys take; in particular, the wife of the household, Leigh Anne (Sandra Bullock, in an Oscar-winning performance). Michael's presence in their lives challenges the entire family about their fears and prejudices.

The Blind Side is heart warming and uplifting, telling its story realistically, without being sentimental or 'cheesy'. As a result, it presents the viewer with a real challenge about what it means to do the right thing, however uncomfortable it may be and whatever obstacles we may have to overcome. While there isn't much overt reference to God, it's obvious that the Tuohys are motivated by their Christian convictions. They don't always get it right, the way they treat Michael sometimes reflects their own preferences and prejudices, but it is clear that their overwhelming motivation for what they do is love. You'll struggle to find a better film in recent years examining what it means in real life to follow Jesus' command to 'love your neighbour as yourself'.

WHAT YOU FELT ABOUT THE FILM

Sometimes young people find it hard to contribute to a group discussion. They may feel shy or that their contribution might appear silly. The first part of the session is therefore a chance for young people to think

about the film and begin to develop a reaction to what they have seen in a way that everyone will have something to contribute. This is a simple, quick exercise to get everyone thinking about their reaction to the film. With each question go round and see what each person would do.

- Sean Tuohy owns lots of fast-food restaurants. Consequently, he's a very wealthy man. If the young people each owned one restaurant what sort of food would it serve and why?
- The Tuohys own a huge house. If the young people lived in a big house and were given one room (other than their bedroom) to do with as they pleased, what would they do with it and why?
- In the film we see each of the different universities competing to attract Michael to come to play football for them. If they were representing a university, what would they realistically offer to get Michael to play for them?

Close this introduction by asking the young people to each list three words they would use to describe the emotions they felt during the film.

KEY THEMES IN THE FILM

The Blind Side is a gut-wrenching, heart-warming and uplifting film that challenges the viewer to think about what it means to 'love our neighbour' in our modern, broken world. This section gives young people an opportunity to engage with some of the issues which the film raises.

1. Love is risky business

The clip is from scene 5. It starts at 7 minutes, 31 seconds and runs until 8 minutes, 49 seconds.

The movies can sometimes make difficult things look

easy (just watch any action film!) but as this film shows, reality isn't like that.

Ask the young people what activities they would like to do as a youth group, assuming time and money weren't an issue. You may want to make a few suggestions to get them started (Sky diving? Fire breathing? Needlework?). Encourage them to be as wild as they like in their suggestions.

Ask the young people to pick one of the suggested activities and to imagine that they are going to do the activity. However, they must put themselves in to your shoes for a moment: before they can go on the activity they must complete a risk assessment. Explain how a simple risk assessment is done, weighing the potential dangers of an activity against the likelihood that the dangers will materialise. (You may want to provide them with some risk assessment forms.) Depending on the group size you may want to split them into smaller groups or you could do it all together.

Having done the risk assessments, still imagining that they were in your shoes and legally responsible for any accidents that might occur, which of the activities would they still choose?

Using the examples of some high-risk pastimes (base jumping, rock climbing), ask why people choose to do activities which carry a high chance of severe injury or death.

When anyone chooses to take a risk it's because they consider the rewards greater than the dangers.

As a whole group, ask what a risk assessment form might have looked for the Tuohy's taking in Michael. (You can make reference to Leigh Anne's wondering if Michael would steal anything and her friends being concerned for the safety of her daughter, Collins.) Of course, we know now that Michael is actually harmless but we only have to think of some of his old friends

from the projects to realise that the risks the Tuohys were taking were real.

So why did the Tuohys take the risk of inviting Michael into their home, into their lives, and into their family? Was it worth it?

Key question: Why should we take risks for God?

Relevant Bible verses:

- Deuteronomy 10.17–19
- Matthew 10.37–39
- Luke 10.30–37
- Romans 5.6–8
- Hebrews 13.1–3

2. Sticks and stones?

The clip is from scene 17. It starts at 1 hour, 9 minutes, 53 seconds and runs until 1 hour, 17 minutes, 42 seconds.

Show the young people a box of chocolates and say that you want to give them out to some special people. Pick a physical feature (hair colour, members of a specific sex, people who wear glasses, etc.) and say that everyone with that particular feature gets a chocolate. Hand them out; no doubt to the complaints of those who are getting none. Explain that it's okay; you have more chocolates to give out. This time give chocolates to everyone who had the first physical feature you mentioned plus an addition feature (i.e. you're giving an extra chocolate to a specific group within the first group you selected). Continue to do this, choosing a more defined group each time, until you're giving chocolates to just one person.

Ask the young people how they feel about what you've just done. When they object you can pretend to be defensive and claim that those complaining had it

easy; you could have chosen to shout abuse at all those who didn't have the physical features you selected.

Before things get out of hand, draw it together and make sure everyone who was deprived of chocolates earlier gets some.

Explain that this was just an exercise that can be laughed off. But how would they feel if they were always discriminated against because of the way they looked? What if shops refused to serve you, people made jokes about you, you weren't allowed to use public transport; all because of the way you looked? The truth is that there have been, and still are, many places in the world where this is the case. Can they think of any examples?

If this was the way the young people were always treated, how would they respond? Would they hurl abuse back? Would they get violent?

In the film we see the Tuohy family struggling to know how to react to racist abuse being hurled at Michael. First they try to ignore it ('Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me'), and then Leigh Anne snaps and shouts a threat at the bigoted man behind her. In the end it's Michael who gives his abusers the best answer to the prejudice they show him, refusing to let the taunts get to him and showing that he can do his job as well as (if not better) than any white man on the pitch.

Key question: What's the best way to answer those who treat us in an unfair way?

Relevant Bible verses:

- Leviticus 19.18
- Matthew 5.38–42
- Acts 25.7–12

- Romans 12.17–21
- 1 Peter 2.18–21

3. Pure motives?

The clip is from scene 25. It starts at 1 hour, 43 minutes, 38 seconds and runs until 1 hour, 45 minutes, 17 seconds.

In the film we see the Tuohys accused of deliberately taking Michael in in order to provide their old university, Mississippi, with a star player for their American Football team. While this isn't the reason they invited Michael into their home, it is true that (i) they really wanted him to play for Mississippi, and (ii) they pushed him both into football and into applying to the university. They confused what they wanted for Michael with what he wanted. In the end it turns out okay, but Leigh Anne acknowledges that they perhaps didn't do things the right way or out of completely selfless motives.

Ask the young people if they think that the story of Michael Oher and the Tuohys is a good one, one that people needed to hear. (Hopefully they'll agree!)

Now ask them to imagine that they are actress Sandra Bullock, being asked to play the role of Leigh Anne Tuohy. If they just look at the script you may decide to do it just because it's a great story which needs to be told.

But imagine that you're also being offered a large, six-figure sum (I have no idea what Sandra Bullock was actually paid) to play the role. You're also told that this is the sort of role which, if played well, could potentially win you an Oscar, the highest award an actor can receive.

Now, for which one of these reasons have you accepted this role?

Explain that none of these reasons are wrong (and we don't know why Sandra Bullock did take the role in real life) but it's important to understand that it's unusual for anyone to have completely pure motives. What are the motives of the following people?

- A mobile phone provider offering you a better service than the provider you're currently with.
- A politician making promises about the changes they'll make if they're elected.
- A boy telling his girlfriend that he loves her.

Explain that we need to be wary when people make claims; do they have some other motive we aren't aware of? Why is this important? Does this mean that we should always be suspicious of people?

At the same time, make the point that, because people's motives are often mixed, we must be careful not to jump to negative conclusions about the reasons people act in a certain way.

Above all, we have to be honest with ourselves about why we're acting a certain way; particularly when we're claiming to do things for the good of others. It doesn't necessarily mean that we shouldn't do those things, but we do need to make sure that we aren't deceiving ourselves. Many people deceive themselves into doing things for God or for other people when really they're doing things for themselves. You may wish to share a personal example of when you've done this and ask the young people if any of them feel that they would like to share a similar incident (about *themselves*, not other people!)

Key question: How pure are our motives?

Relevant Bible verses:

- 1 Chronicles 29.6
- Proverbs 16.2

- Jeremiah 17.9
- 1 Corinthians 4.5
- James 4.3

4. *What's in a name?*

The clip is from scene 2. It starts at 7 minutes, 31 seconds and runs until 8 minutes, 49 seconds.

In the film we see the school coach, Bert, challenging the rest of the school staff as to whether the school is Christian in anything other than name.

Before the session, prepare a small cardboard box and draw a big 'X' on it with a thick marker. Keep it out of sight when the young people arrive.

After watching the clip, say that you've just got a new X-box that you want to show them. Reveal your cardboard box (and enjoy their reaction!) When they protest that it's not an X-box ask why not; after all, it's a box with an 'X' on it, isn't it? What would they expect of an X-box? Would they be disappointed if they paid for an X-box and ended up with one like yours?

Explain that we feel disappointed when something or someone doesn't live up to the standards which we expect. Maybe they've felt this with a football team; Accrington Stanley supporters disappointment at losing to Chelsea would be nothing compared to the disappointment of Chelsea supporters if they lost to Accrington Stanley. Why? Because Chelsea is a much richer club with (in theory) much better players. Everyone would expect Chelsea to beat Accrington Stanley every time.

Or perhaps the young people have known the disappointment of buying some clothes (or anything for that matter) from a well-respected brand that

turned out to be poor quality. We associate certain names with a certain standard and we're disappointed when they don't live up to that.

What sort of standard should we expect from people who call themselves Christians? Do we feel that we always see that standard from Christians?

It's important to stress to the young people that calling yourself a Christian does not automatically mean that you become perfect. What it does mean is that we have accepted Jesus forgiveness and sacrifice for all the wrong things we do. Because we love Jesus and what he's done for us, we try to live like him (the word 'Christian' actually means 'Little Christ'), with the help of his Spirit in us.

Key question: If someone calls themselves a Christian, are they automatically a better person?

Relevant Bible verses:

- Isaiah 29.13
- Matthew 7.21–23
- Matthew 25.31–46
- 1 Corinthians 13.1–3
- James 1.26–27

5. Choose life

The clip is from scene 26. It starts at 1 hour, 50 minutes, 42 seconds and runs until 1 hour, 54 minutes, 3 seconds.

In the clip, we see Leigh Anne giving Michael the choice to do whatever he wants with his life, despite the fact that we know that she has her own preferences for what he does. But, because Leigh Anne is family to him, Michael ends up choosing her preferences for himself.

Ask the young people if there's anything that they

want to do which their parents won't allow them to do. Do they understand why their parents have made that decision? Do they agree?

Explain that being a parent is a tough job. You have your own dreams about the sort of life you want your children to have, the values you want them to hold, the careers you want them to follow, but there's no way of guaranteeing that these things will happen.

Split the young people into small groups. In their groups, ask them to imagine what they would like their children to grow up to be like. Ask them to try to agree on the most important things. (Are they more concerned with what job their children have or with what sort of character they have?)

Drawing the groups back together, ask them to feedback on their answers. Were there any disagreements? What about?

- How would they help their children grow up the 'best way'? Should they force their children to do everything their way, even when they're adults? Or should they let their children do whatever they want, even as toddlers? At what point should their children be given freedom?
- If it hasn't already been mentioned, point out that the best way to ensure that their children follow a certain way of life is to model it. How do they feel about doing that?

Read out the following poem:

A Child Learns

If a child lives with criticism,
 he learns to condemn.
 If a child lives with hostility,
 he learns to fight.
 If a child lives with ridicule,
 he learns to be shy.

If a child lives with shame,
 he learns to feel guilty.
 If a child lives with tolerance,
 he learns to be patient.
 If a child lives with encouragement,
 he learns confidence.
 If a child lives with praise,
 he learns to appreciate.
 If a child lives with fairness,
 he learns justice.
 If a child lives with security,
 he learns to have faith.
 If a child lives with approval,
 he learns to like himself.
 If a child lives with acceptance, and friendship,
 he learns to find love in the world.

(Author unknown)

Key question: What does it feel like for a parent to watch their children make wrong choices? What does it feel like for Father God?

Relevant Bible verses:

- Deuteronomy 30.19–20
- Proverbs 22.6
- Luke 15.11–24
- Galatians 5.1
- Philemon 12 – 14

COMPARING THE STORY

The third part of the session is a chance to compare the story of the film with a story in the Bible. What are the similarities and differences, and what does this tell us about God's Kingdom?

Young people may not grasp all the theological points that could be made, but it's important for them to begin to get used to the idea of critiquing what they

see and holding it against the values and beliefs of the Christian faith.

Some of this reflection may come from an open discussion and as seen above, there are many themes and directions that this could take.

There are many fictional stories about characters from poor deprived backgrounds who are suddenly welcomed into a rich and wealthy home (*Great Expectations*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Pretty Woman*). What makes Michael's story in *The Blind Side* much rarer is that it's a true story; like the story of Ruth in the Bible.

Summarise the book of Ruth (if you have time, you may want to encourage the young people to act out the story while others read it out; at four chapters it's one of the shorter books of the Bible).

It may be worth giving a bit of background to the story as it's told:

- The Moabites had a different religion from the Jews, one which involved idol worship and child sacrifice.
- In biblical times a woman's husband was her main source of protection, security and income (a slightly more recent example of this would be *Pride and Prejudice*. Even 200 years ago, a woman was nothing without a husband; preferably a rich one).
- Under Jewish law, those who had no other means of income could walk behind the harvesters in a field and pick up whatever they dropped. Jewish family law is more complicated but, simply, if a man died without leaving an heir (like Ruth's former husband, Mahlon) then the closest male relative had a duty to marry the widow and provide children; these children would take the name of the

previous husband. If the closest relative did not wish to do this, then it was passed to the next in line.

Invite the young people to compare and contrast the lives of Michael, adopted into the Tuohy family, and Ruth, married into the family of Boaz. You may want to consider the following questions:

- Both Michael and Ruth had quite traumatic backgrounds. Whose background would you rather have had? Why?
- Michael is given an initial 'leg-up' by being given the place at a private Christian school. Ruth finds similar help working in Boaz's field. How did this make a positive difference to their situation? In what ways did this leave them still lacking (emotionally, materially, etc.)?
- Michael and Ruth cross into a 'culture' which is not their own. What sort of cultural adjustments would they both have had to make?
- We see a certain amount of the prejudice Michael had to encounter. What sort of prejudice might Ruth have encountered in Bethlehem?
- Leigh Anne and Naomi push Michael and Ruth into football and marriage, respectively; both of which ended up in providing them with long-term security. How much choice did either Michael or Ruth get in the matter? What motivated Leigh Anne and Naomi? Did they do it in the right way? Do you think either Michael or Ruth regretted these life choices?
- Both Michael and Ruth are now famous. Why? (If the young people don't know, Ruth was the great-grandmother of King David and, therefore, a direct ancestor of Jesus Christ.)
- In what ways are we like Michael and Ruth?

You may want to conclude by reading either Luke 15.11–24 or Ephesians 1.3–10 (esp. v. 5). Spiritually we have less than Michael Oher's single t-shirt in a plastic bag, but God longs to give us so much and he longs for us to be part of his family.

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