



A LIFELONG ENCOUNTER

Tim Woolley

TIM WOOLLEY EXPLORES HOW A CLASSIC BRITISH FILM OF THE PAST MIGHT HELP US IN OUR CURRENT REFLECTIONS ON MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS.

A few years ago, while on holiday I went on a pilgrimage to Carnforth railway station. Old film buffs will recognise the station as the location for one of the most enduringly popular British films, 'Brief Encounter'. For anyone who has never seen the film (and you really must!), 'Brief Encounter' is a 1945 British romantic drama directed by David Lean about British suburban life on the eve of World War 2. The story centres on Laura, a married woman with children, whose conventional life becomes increasingly complicated because of a chance meeting at a railway station with a stranger, Alec. They fall in love, and begin to meet regularly in the refreshment room of the station (where you can now enjoy a sumptuous lunch, hence my pilgrimage!) At the end of the film, realising she can't continue the subterfuge, Laura returns to her husband Fred, who suddenly shows that he has noticed her distracted manner in the past few weeks and has perhaps even guessed the reason. He thanks her for coming back to him and she cries in his arms.

The film is beautifully shot and very evocative of its period: indeed, the viewer can almost taste the smoke as trains pass through the station and smell the brewing tea in the refreshment room! It is a testament to great film-making and to an era long past. Moreover, it could never be made today. The primacy of marital fidelity which Laura precariously, but ultimately successfully, clings to was widely shared and respected at the time the film was made, but now society has largely left such values behind and with them vanishes the credibility of the plot to many modern viewers. Today Alec would simply jump into bed with Laura and the tension, if there was any at all, would be in how they would keep the affair from her husband. This is because the 'right' of Alec and Laura to the self-expression of their own passions would take precedent over any wider responsibilities.

There is a danger of course in nostalgia, and the film challenges us to reflect on what has been gained, as well as what has been lost in the intervening years. Laura's is a routine but loving marriage;

plenty of women, though, were trapped in abusive and damaging marriages and with divorce regarded as scandalous they lived miserable, unfulfilled lives. Noel Coward, who wrote the play the film was based upon, was a homosexual at a time when to be so was illegal and could be punished by prison. No one who worships a God of grace and truth should ever wish for a return to times when people lived in fear if their lives did not match up to societal norms enforced with little compassion or understanding.

We are not supposed now to find Laura, with all her struggles and contradictions, as heroic in the way that those who saw the film in the immediate post-war period did. Yet I still do; because it seems to me that at the core of the film is something rather profound and ultimately deeply Biblical. The idea that a loving marriage - the sacred contract between a man and a woman made before God and fulfilled by both partners - takes precedent over self-expression and that, when things get merely stale, trying again is preferable to seeking excitement elsewhere. This echoes down the years through myriad social changes, its relevance undiminished.

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The Church of which I am a minister still stands with Laura. 'The Methodist Church believes that marriage is a gift of God and that it is God's intention that a marriage should be a lifelong union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman' (SO 011A (1)). Such a position, of course, predates Laura by quite a long way; marriage as a public declaration of vows between a man and a woman before God has been a part of church practice since at least the 12th Century and Methodism's first authorised liturgy, 'The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America' (1784), was an abridgement of the Anglican 'Prayer Book' (1662), which recognised the same understanding. Such an understanding is based upon a reading of the Bible in its totality. From beginning to end, the overarching biblical pattern for marriage is one of a lifelong union of one man and one woman, and as such is therefore the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy. It is a pattern built into creation itself and is symbolic of God's own relationship with his people, depicted as the culmination of God's creating and redeeming work. It is an understanding which is modelled in the person, life and teaching of Jesus. Christ affirmed the vocation to and lifestyle of singleness; permitted divorce in particular circumstances whilst upholding the Jewish understanding of marriage as part of the created order; and reaffirmed God's original purpose in marriage, namely the lifelong faithfulness of a man and a woman united by God, a gift from him to be cherished and celebrated.

In our current debates about the nature of marriage and relationships reflecting on 'Brief Encounter' reminds us that human life and its passions are messy and complicated. It enables us to see that societal norms change and that those norms which were merely judgemental and intolerant in the past are best left there, unlamented. It also enables us to see that if a norm is rooted not in prurience or narrow-mindedness, but rather in a deeper, older biblical tradition which mirrors something of God's gracious, faithful relationship with humanity and his continuing desire for human flourishing, it should never be cast aside lightly or so altered as to change its fundamental meaning. Marriage, written into creation as the lifelong union of one man and one woman and as a symbol of the union between God and his people in the new creation, is a gift from God himself to be cherished and celebrated. I hope and pray that we, as God's people called Methodists, will continue to stand with Laura, and, more importantly, on God's word.



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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION / GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Watch Brief Encounter (ITV Studios Home Entertainment, 2008). How are themes of sin, forgiveness, and faithfulness dealt with in Laura's story?
2. Reflect on the changing understanding of marriage and relationships in our society. How might the central premise of Brief Encounter - that faithfulness and responsibilities to family are more important than individual freedom and self-expression - be conveyed in a loving and compassionate way today?
3. Read through Methodism's authorised Marriage Service in 'The Methodist Worship Book' (367-383) and the suggested additional Scripture readings (398). How does the marriage relationship between a man and woman in our understanding mirror God's relationship within the Trinity and with humanity?

FURTHER READING

'A Christian Understanding of Family Life, The Single Person and Marriage':
www.methodist.org.uk/media/1245111/meth-statement-family-life-single-person-marriage-1992-0714.pdf
 'Statement on Marriage & Human Relationships,' Methodist Evangelicals Together:
www.methodistevangelicals.org.uk/resources/met-statement-marriage-and-human-relationships