

Movie discussion resource **The Father (2020)**
Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

Commences in cinemas on April 1 in Australia

Genre: Drama

Rating: M (for distressing language and themes)

Length: 1 hour 37 minutes

Starring Academy Award winners Olivia Colman and Sir Anthony Hopkins

Novelist, Playwright, Director: Florian Zeller



Brief synopsis

Anthony Hopkins plays a strong willed 80 year old Englishman, also named Anthony, who 'has his ways' and refuses all assistance from his daughter Anne (Olivia Colman) as he ages, even when he recognises his progressive memory loss and disorientation. Kurt Jensen notes: 'Anthony isn't quite "losing" his mind. Rather, his brain functions like an ancient radio in which the tubes are blowing out one at a time'. It's a depiction of things falling away. As Anthony tries to make sense of his changing circumstances, he begins to doubt his loved ones, his own mind and even the fabric of his reality. This movie is told from Hopkins' perspective as he ages and his memory fades. Things get confusing - for him and for the viewer with the fractured storytelling. The viewer has to piece everything together - characters, timelines, location. Some scenes repeats themselves with completely another character replaced, some elements from the set are altered or entirely disappeared. Even the house Anthony is living in may change completely. In this way, viewers experience the dementia that is affecting Anthony and his sense of perception. It is designed to mimic what an aging brain experiences. Only towards the end does the viewer get an opportunity to make sense of it all.

SimonsRant review says, 'The confusion, the anger, the regret, the brutal honesty and lack of self awareness, the fear, the bipolar nature was all so frighteningly accurate that I forgot many times that I was watching a film not a documentary or even real life'.

Jade Pietro describes it this way: We witness Anthony's mental decline directly as we are transported to his ever-changing world. It is a jarring and disturbing view. Scenes are flipped and repeated by different characters, timelines are repeated. Actors trade roles and utter familiar dialogue heard before. Items are lost or found and settings are slightly askew with changes in decor hinting at his mental disarray and anguish. As moviegoers, we cannot recognize the real from the surreal and the film accomplishes what no other film has done before...we become as dead to the real world, just as Anthony has, lost in a parallel universe and unable to find an easy escape. The emotional upheaval is palpable and moving.

This movie is emotionally powerful, beautiful crafted, moving and sad. Not for the faint hearted. It will be confronting for many who watch it, particularly those with a lived experience of dementia. But there is no doubt of how impactful it is - it is a beautifully crafted film with powerful performances that will stay with you. It captures the very real and devastating journey of dementia for so many people - and their loved ones. Olivia Colman as the carer for her father, is brilliant.

(Other movies in a similar vein include Armour, Still Alice, Away From Her, Iris)

Questions for discussion

Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie, such as:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

The film may be a catalyst for conversation leading into deep sharing and mutual support. Recommended to families with elderly parents and friends, Ministry agents and Chaplains.

Dementia/Alzheimer disease

This movie is told through the perspective of an elderly man entering into the painful journey marked by loss of memory.

=> Perhaps the conversation may centre around caring for loved ones on that journey, or your own fears of entering that journey.

Behaviours

Dementia is a result of changes that take place in the brain and affects the person's memory, mood and behaviour. In other instances, changes may be occurring in the person's environment, their health or medication. Sir Anthony Hopkins brilliantly portrays the confusing world for someone with dementia and Olivia Colman is brilliant as his daughter Anne who just wants what's best for her father. She struggles to deal with his deteriorating condition as he journeys from a charming, warm good natured father to someone who cajoles, bullies, demands attention and doesn't hold back on his pent up frustrations. He sheds tears, gets cranky and flies into fits of rage, as he slowly losing his grip on what's happening.

=> Perhaps this may be a conversation that offers a listening ear for those whose journey as a carer has been tough, trying to understand and support people with dementia.

Nursing home/aged care

This difficult decision is one that many people have had to make for elderly loved ones, moving from 'at home' caregivers to supported aged care when more resources are needed than family can provide on their own.

=> Sharing some of those experiences may provide some support, insight and consolation.

A theology of dementia

- * All personhood is given by God, because human life is God's gift. The psalmist said, 'For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works.' (Psalm 139:13-14) Our whole person or being is made in the image of God and as such nothing can take that away. For a person who has dementia, their personhood hasn't ceased or mysteriously disappeared because of the disease's influences upon them. Personhood under God, as it is given by grace, holds high honour and respect, as he wants to be in relationship with us.
- * St Paul writes: "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39)
- * What does it mean to be a disciple when you have forgotten who Jesus is?
- * John Swinton writes: 'When I worked as a mental health chaplain, I was always struck by the way in which people with severe dementia who were withdrawn and assumed to be unable to communicate for the majority of their lives would change when drawn into participating in spiritual practices. People would very often "spring into life" when asked to pray the Lord's Prayer, their words clear and coherent in ways that were deeply dissonant with their normal day to day communicational responses. When I offered people the Eucharist their bodies reached out and responded even when their minds no longer seemed able to grasp the intellectual complexities of the practice. When we greeted one another with the peace of Christ, people would respond and embrace, even if only for a brief moment, in ways that they simply didn't respond in other contexts. My medical colleagues tell me it is nothing more than procedural memory: the product of long term memories of skills that were well learned and ingrained into people's memories in ways that more recent memories were not. *I have come to realise that memory is not just what we recall. Memory is, in fact, something that lives within our bodies; our memories are our bodies and our bodies are our memories. Memory is all that we are.*'