



Beatitudes on Film: Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted

Love lifts us Up

John Quinn

In the depths of grief, it can be difficult to imagine the comfort promised in the second Beatitude. But through the tears that inevitably flow during any viewing of a recent Oscar-winner, John Quinn finds an animated illustration of the solace offered to those who mourn and of the response that is required. Make sure you have tissues at the ready, because we find our next Beatitude on Film for children in *Up*.

There are times in everybody's life when this particular Beatitude can ring hollow. It is difficult to countenance God's comfort in the immediate depths of mourning. Loss can bring overwhelming sadness, it can invite anger; very rarely does it come pre-packaged with a dose of genuine solace.

And yet that solace is just what we are offered in this Beatitude. All else is temporary, subject to the laws of the natural universe, but God's love is forever, offered as a perpetual salve to broken human hearts. God's love is the suture that holds the aching lesion of grief closed. He will not banish the wound from history, but He will bind our skin back together; our scars serve as necessary souvenirs of God's grace. His comforting promise is to rebuild the broken, and yet, in order for this to happen, we must at some point become fractured. We are blessed when we mourn, because only then can we then receive eternal comfort in God.

The simple and effective genius of *Up* is that it manages to convey these eternal truths in the packaging of a children's animated movie. I am yet to meet anybody who has not been moved to tears both of sincere sadness and genuine joy by this film. There is mourning, undoubtedly, but there is also comfort in abundance.

The film's opening – a ten-minute pseudo-short film telling the back-story of the main character, Carl and his wife, Ellie – can effectively be taken in isolation: it



is a potent meditation on hope, humanity and humility. It treasures relationship and proclaims the mercy at the heart of matrimony. It shows that marriage is about more than romantic love or fleeting moments, but about two people finding solace in one another and trusting that there is a greater power at work when desires and dreams slowly inch out of reach.

Ellie's dignity in the face of adversity is one of the most touching elements in the film. As she sits on the porch trying to come to terms with the apparent cruelty of her deepest desires being crushed, the piano tinkles a heart-breaking lament. She might be an animation, but this is one of the most complete and tender odes to grief in recent cinema: Ellie's mourning of her loss of motherhood rustles every fibre of her being.

Yet hope remains. Carl and Ellie's sense of adventure cannot be contained by a truly desperate event. They know that their identity in marriage goes beyond parenthood. When hearts break and when events conspire to scuff the veneer of joyful life, deeper truths come into play. And so a renewed vigour carries them into the next phase of their life. They have received comfort, not in spite of their pain, but because of it: their recovered strength embodies the promise of this Beatitude.

But human life is brittle, and mourning is an integral part of it. We will all experience it at some point – Jesus himself tasted the salty tears of true grief (cf. John

11:35) – and it opens us to God's mercy. All earthly relationships must come to an end; the danger of which Carl and Ellie's story warns is that if partners rely solely on each other, there can be no satisfactory conclusion. If we take our lives out of God's hands there can be no comfort because we are self-absorbed by our humanity.

The drab greys and sombre music of Carl's life without Ellie show us a man in the depths of despair. Clinging to poignant memories and isolated from the world around him, Carl represents all the things that we do when we try to become our own source of solace. We steel our hearts and proclaim that we don't need anybody else. We barricade ourselves from more hurt, but such resolve often hardens into a stubbornness that only ever results in an outburst. That is exactly what happens to Carl.

His house is his last refuge from the noisy, industrious world of 'progress' that surrounds him, and so he promises to protect it with his life. He calls it 'our' house, as a way of maintaining his connection with his wife. When he is threatened with losing his house, and therefore his wife all over again, Carl knows he must act. But he is not yet open to the comfort that can only come from refuge in the Lord. He wants control, and to have a relationship with Ellie on his own terms. Therefore, Carl plots to up sticks – literally – and finally follow the adventure he had promised Ellie all those years ago.

What happens next is an illustration of how God has a way of challenging us, of summoning us to dig into the parts of ourselves we thought were long dead, no longer necessary, or even non-existent. God knows us better than we do ourselves, and He knows exactly what we need in times of sorrow. Carl always wanted a child with Ellie, yet it was not to be. And just when he was ready to give up the fight, he is served with the task of being a surrogate dad to a rudderless young boy who just wants to show his own father how good he can be. Russell, the over-enthusiastic Wilderness Explorer, is a son mourning the absence of his prodigal father. In contrast to Carl, Russell has reacted to loss by becoming more outgoing and effervescent, full of youthful optimism that things will work out if he just finds the right path.

True comfort and peace for Carl can only come once he accepts and lives up to the new calling he has in his life: parenting Russell and standing up to his childhood hero, Muntz. It requires a complete rejection of the way he had been living since Ellie died. Carl initially wanted to return to his simple childhood memories, where he sought the innocence and security of youth, protection from hurt and loss. But this attempt to dictate his own experience led to stubbornness, a false kind of security. Through his journey with Russell, Carl learns not to dwell in mournfulness, not to act out of his ego; rather, he opens up to new life, to a new sense of purpose.

And this is the important point: God offers comfort by renewing life rather than by rescinding loss. He does not press the reset button to vanquish our memories or our experience of grief; rather He accompanies us in heartache and gently leads us through our pain towards something new. God's honest embrace of our suffering means that we cannot be passive in return; that He promises to comfort us in our mourning rather than restore what we have lost surely means that He wants to build in some way on what we have been through, to respond to our experience and His love.

True healing requires a response. Oftentimes, we just want the quick cure, with no further demands on our time, but there is a fundamental difference between only receiving a cure and being fully healed. Of the ten lepers that Jesus cures, the only one to be completely healed is the one that comes back to thank him, and Jesus remarks that it was his 'faith that has made [him] well' (Luke 17:11-19).

Carl's obsession in *Up* is with Paradise Falls, the legendary land he recalls from his youth. This name is interesting and not without significance. Carl's paradise has fallen, as any paradise shaped by broken human nature always does. It is an inevitable part of the human condition to have hopes dashed, dreams shattered, and ideas punctured. When experienced separately from God, even our wildest dreams and desires fall short of our expectations. But Christ promises us a hope that goes beyond empty rhetoric. He will not abandon us in our moment of need, if we will but abandon ourselves in Him. *Up* reminds us of God's abundance, mercy and grace in our hour of need, and, just as importantly, of how we are called to respond to that mercy.

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