

Milk (2008)

Rated R. Our ratings: V-4 ; L- 5; S/N -4. Running time: 2 hours 8 min.

*Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.
Proverbs 31:8-9*

Although virtually all churchMilk folk, South and North, agree today that the Civil Rights Movement was a good thing for church and country, we are divided over the issue of homosexuality and the push for gay rights, many Christians refusing to see parallels between the struggle for African American rights and that for gay rights. This well-made biographical film can put a human face on the issue, at least for those willing to watch and think about it. Difficult though it might be, even one opposed to the homosexual lifestyle might acknowledge the humanity of gay persons, so movingly pictured in Gus Van Sant's film

Depending greatly upon a 1984 documentary, The Times of Harvey Milk (which won an Oscar), the film begins with a series of newsreels depicting the police arresting and beating gay men

around the country, thus reminding us of a time when just being gay was construed as a crime. (Policemen in a great many American cities, with their macho code, apparently loathed homosexuals and their lifestyle.) Then we see Harvey Milk at the age of 48 speaking into the mike of a tape recorder about his life of the past 8 years. He and his lover Scott Smith (James Franco) had met in New York and then moved to San Francisco. Though not welcomed by the heterosexual shopkeepers on Castro Street, the two men had set up a camera shop there which soon became a popular gathering place for other homosexuals. As the police continued to harass gays, Harvey found himself coming to the defense of his community, someone dubbing him "the mayor of Castro Street."

The film shows the beginning of his involvement, with his telling the gathering that they must instill hope in others. It was the time when singer Anita Bryant was touring the country speaking against gays and their rights. In California itself a proposition was being put forth that would ban gays from teaching in public schools. Soon the activist began his speeches with the words that became his hallmark, "My name is Harvey Milk and I'm here to recruit you!" The often tumultuous events are shown with great compassion, and even humor, as the following exchange between Milk and conservative politician Dan White shows: White declares, "Society can't exist without the family." Milk, "We're not against that." White, "Can two men reproduce?" Milk, "No, but God knows we keep trying."

Although Sean Penn has deservedly received plaudits for his portrayal Milk, due notice must be paid to Josh Brolin for his bringing to life the man who murdered Milk, Dan White, Alison Pill as Anne Kronenberg, Milk's campaign manager, and Victor Garber as Mayor Moscone. Neither the actor nor screenwriter Dustin Lance Black vilify Dan White. Instead, we are presented with a devout but deeply troubled man, who might have been a closeted gay himself. When Harvey's fourth run for election to the city's Board of Supervisors was successful in

1977, the two men clash, and yet maintain for a while a personal relationship, White even inviting Milk to the christening of his child. The ultimate shooting is shown as a tragedy for the murderer, as well as for Milk and those who had supported him so faithfully. Gus van Sant's film serves not only as a memorial to a brave man, but also as a timely reminder that intolerance is still strong, as the very state which elected the nation's first openly gay politician also banned gay marriage in the 2008 election.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What do you believe about homosexuality and gays? Has the film affected this in any way? My own journey has been from one of denunciation to grudging tolerance to affirmation, due to becoming acquainted with gay people and a deeper study of the Scriptures. In my last parish I saw the importance of putting a human face on the issue in the case of an older parishioner who said that the day that the Presbyterian Church approved the ordination of gays to the office of elder or pastor he would leave the church. Then a minute or so later while talking about a member of the community widely known as gay, he had nothing but good things to say about the man. Do you think it is possible to disapprove of the gay life style and yet affirm their civil rights?

2. When we hear the state senator pushing the proposition banning gays from teaching, what myth or stereotype of gays does he use? How is the reaction to gays of so many based on fear rather than reason? (I recall the jarring experience many years ago of counseling a young man whom I admired for his devout faith when he told me he was gay, and that the last thing he wished for anyone else was to become gay.) What other falsehoods have been spread about gays?

3. What does your church teach about homosexuality? What Scriptures does it base its stand on? Are these denouncing a voluntary or innate type of homosexuality—and why do you think

this is important? How are medical and psychological/psychiatric experts divided on the issue?

4. Do you think that it is possible to love the gay person yet oppose the lifestyle?

5. Harvey's words – "You gotta give 'em hope" – are carved into a bust of Milk that was placed in a rotunda of San Francisco's City Hall. How is this shown to be important in the film?