

Gran Torino

A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor

In the downhill journey to Easter, a central figure is Caiphas, the Jewish high priest, who announces that it is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish (John 11:50). Such understandings, of the power of sacrifice to ensure community transformation, are ingrained in Christian faith and make *Gran Torino* a gritty contemporary exploration of these themes in our world today.

Gran Torino is directed by Clint Eastwood, who also stars as the main character, Walt Kowalski, an embittered veteran of the Korean war. Aged 78, this is most likely Clint Eastwood's final acting appearance and it serves as a fitting dénouement to the vigilante violence made famous by Eastwood's "Dirty Harry" character.

Walt finds himself recently widowed, yet happily alienated from his family. From his front porch and down quiet Detroit suburban streets Walt grows over his changing neighbourhood and the growing presence of Hmong refugees. Like Walt, they too are struggling to cope with the evolving face of contemporary America, in which white picket fences serve as the battle lines for unresolved racism and unreconciled prejudice.

The silent star of this movie is Walt's pride and joy, his 1972 mint condition *Gran Torino* car. Walt's neighbour, Hmong teenager Thao Vang Lor (Bee Vang) is bullied into stealing the car in order to gain initiation into the local Hmong gang. Caught by Walt, an unlikely friendship develops, one that will change Walt, Thao and his neighbourhood for ever.

Central to Walt's growth is local Catholic priest, Father Janovich (Christopher Carley). It is a (surprisingly) positive portrayal of a religious leader. His awareness of local issues, his ability to network with other community groups and his willingness to be a peacemaker shine. Initially rebuffed by Walt ("You are an overeducated 27-year-old virgin who likes to hold the hands of superstitious old ladies and promise them everlasting life,") Father Janovich remains pastorally persistent. His entry into the pub for a drink with Clint shows the power of entering the turf of another and the potential for good listening to become a prophetic challenge that can change a person's perception of life.

Similarly central is Thao's sister, Sue Lor (Ahney Her). She is the person of peace who steps over barriers to embrace Walt into his changing neighbourhood. It is her sacrifice that becomes a catalyst for community change. Viewed with Easter eyes, Sue becomes a female Christ figure.

The film is an Eastwood family affair. Clint directs and acts. His older son, Kyle, provides the musical score, while his younger son, Scott has a minor acting role.

Gran Torino is never a great film. The opening 45 minutes meander. Some scenes deserve a decent edit and the constant racism is hard to stomach. Despite these shortcomings, the plot themes of sacrifice, and their location in the grit of multi-cultural urban America make *Gran Torino* disturbing, yet powerful, front porch theology in the journey to Easter.