

# Redemption Always



Michael B. Jordan, left, and Jamie Fox, right, star in *Just Mercy*

*A new film echoes those same Gospel principles that call us to honor the God-given dignity of every person and oppose the practice of capital punishment*

by Gerard Condon

**J**UST Mercy (Warner Bros., 2019) is based on a memoir of the same name by Bryan Stevenson. He became the lawyer for Walter “Johnny D” McMillian, an African-American from Monroeville, Alabama, who was sentenced to death for the murder of Ronda Morrison on November 1, 1986. McMillian was actually at a ‘fish-fry’ on that day, miles away from the scene of the crime. He had no motive and there was no physical evidence to link him to the murder of the 18-year-old. Yet he would spend six years on death row at the Holman Correctional Facility in Alabama. Thanks to Stevenson, justice did prevail in the case. However, as this year’s Black Lives Matter protests made clear, racially motivated injustices still occur in the United States and around the world.

## Fiction into fact

In 1989 Stevenson (played by Michael B. Jordan), was a newly graduated lawyer from Harvard University. He went to Alabama to work *pro bono* for the African-American and Latino prisoners in the State’s prisons who had been poorly defended by their lawyers. Together with Eva Ansley (Brie Larson), he founded a free legal aid charity, the Equal Justice Initiative. The case against Johnny D McMillian (Jamie Fox) soon came to his attention because the grounds for the verdict were so flimsy. The idealistic young lawyer was determined to set things right.

Stevenson soon got to know what it was like to be African-American in the deep south, whether in the humiliating strip searches as he visited death-row, or harassment by the traffic police, or the condescending

attitude of the State Prosecutor, Tommy Chapman (Rafe Spall) and Monroeville sheriff, Tom Tate (Michael Harding). The people of Monroeville took ironic pride in being the hometown of novelist Harper Lee and the setting for her 1960 bestseller, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. It also told the story of a black man wrongly convicted of murder and of Atticus Finch, his heroic lawyer (played by Gregory Peck in the acclaimed 1962 movie). That fictional case bore remarkable similarities to the unfolding true story of McMillian, especially the racial prejudices that it portrayed.

Stevenson had already learned that his best strategy, when faced with racist provocations, was to remain calm and dignified. That same nobility characterised the attitude of Johnny D and his family throughout their ordeal. For the sake of dramatic impact, *Just Mercy* would have benefitted from some of the righteous indignation shown in similarly themed movies such as *Mississippi Burning* (1988). *Just Mercy* is all together more restrained, even sedate, probably in the interest of remaining factually accurate.

## Resilience

As unsound as McMillian’s conviction had been, Stevenson’s initial efforts at overturning the conviction were rebuffed. Those who could provide alibis for McMillian’s whereabouts on the day of the crime were either discredited by the State Prosecutor or intimidated by the police. It was only when Stevenson interviewed Ralph Myers (Tim Blake Nelson), the State’s key witness, that the inadequacies of the prosecution case became obvious to the courts. Myers had been

coerced by the police to testify against McMillian so that he would get a lighter sentence for his own crimes. Yet, even when, on April 16, 1992, Myers told the court that he had provided false testimony in the original trial, the judge chose not to believe him.

Being sent back to death row was a bitter moment for McMillian, whose faith in the criminal justice system had just begun to recover. Still, he had developed a resilience through prison life that kept his hopes alive. One of his strategies was to take deep breaths and think about the pine-forests where he once worked.

Stevenson's next step, on behalf of his client, was to highlight the case through the media. In November 1992 it became the subject of an episode of *60 Minutes*, the flagship investigative programme of CBS News. Some months later the Supreme Court of Alabama overturned the death sentence and ordered a retrial. On March 2, 1993 at a hearing in Baldwin County Courthouse, the State Prosecutor reluctantly joined in the appeal to dismiss all charges. A follow-up investigation into Ronda Morrison's murder confirmed that McMillian was innocent. It implicated a white man in the crime, though no one has ever been brought to justice for her murder.

Walter McMillian died in 2013 as a result of early onset dementia that was probably caused by the suffering he experienced on death-row. Despite the miscarriage of justice, Sheriff Tate

**Brie Larson as Eva Ansley; the movie shows how Ansley started working with lawyer Bryan Stevenson (Michael B. Jordan) to reform the justice system**



was re-elected to office six times after McMillian's release. However, the good work of the Equal Justice Initiative continues to this day. The group has won lighter sentences or proven the innocence of more than 140 men on death-row. The movie's epilogue informs the viewer that for every nine death sentences that are carried out in the United States, one involves a miscarriage of justice.

### Chilling subplot

Director Destin Daniel Cretton tells the story in a factual way that avoids sentimentality, but there is no doubting the strength of conviction that underlies this film. Its big studio production values are evident in the attention to detail and the accomplished performances of the cast. This lengthy movie (136 minutes) does drag in the final quarter, especially in Jordan's courtroom speeches which, though beautifully scripted, lack the commanding authority of Gregory Peck.

It is the supporting cast that shines in this film, especially Tim Blake Nelson, as the criminal who recants and Academy Award winner Brie Larson as Stevenson's legal secretary. The subplot concerning Herbert Richardson (1946-1989), played by Bob Morgan, provides the movie's most effective and chilling scenes. Richardson was sentenced to death for planting a pipe-bomb that accidentally killed a young girl. All the time he suffered from a severe form of PTSD, caused by his experiences in the Vietnam War. His state of mind and exemplary army record was not credited during his trial. The film's

depiction of him awaiting execution is a powerful indictment of the inhumanity of the death penalty. Even the prison guard (Hayes Mercure) who had been racist and sadistic, suddenly changed his attitude, such was Richardson's dignity as he was strapped into the electric chair.

### Updated teaching

Pope Francis has revised the paragraphs of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) that concern capital punishment to better reflect the Church's teaching on the right to life. In numbers 2266-2267 the *Catechism* had restated the traditional teaching that the Church "does not exclude, in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty." In a series of papal audiences in 2018, Pope Francis argued that the death penalty is no longer required now that "more effective systems of detention have been developed;" the guilty person should not be deprived of the "possibility of redemption" through repentance and forgiveness. Above all, "the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person." Even those found guilty of grievous crime have a human face. As the movie's title suggests, justice should always be tempered with mercy. ♦

