

The King's Speech: Film Discussion Guide

Film length: 118 minutes
 Film rating: R
 Director: Tom Hooper
 Genre: History/Biography

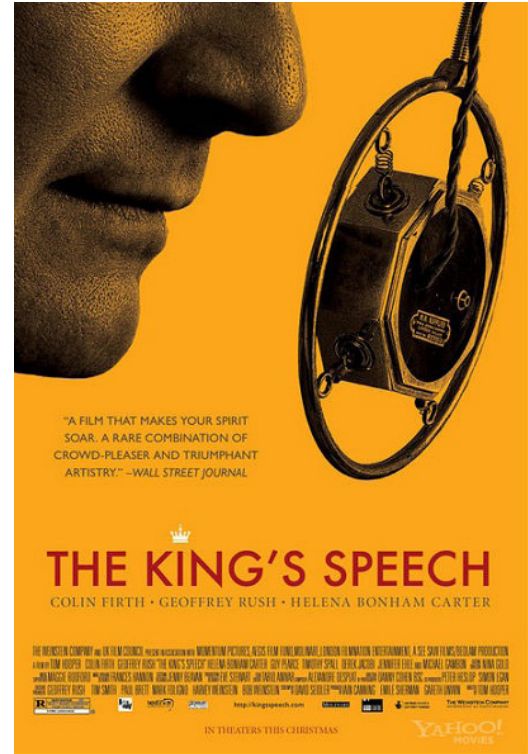
Synopsis:

The King's Speech opens with a stammering Prince Albert of York (later King George VI) giving a speech at the close of the 1925 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. The story that unfolds is set in Great Britain during the Great Depression and brought to a close with King George VI declaring war on Nazi Germany in 1939.

The screen narrative follows the historical trajectory that leads up to Great Britain declaring war on Nazi Germany. This film is a very personal story of a man and his family as they prepare to come on the world stage at a turning point in history marked by the Second World War. Essentially we have a story of a man who does not want to be king and lead a nation, one who is not prepared for the leadership that will be required at this time in history. However, Prince Albert, soon to become King George VI, painfully comes to the realization that his personal wishes will have to be jettisoned, the challenge of leadership of nearly a fourth of the world's population will have to be embraced, and this road to personal freedom and world leadership will require significant personal sacrifice from him.

But he is not alone in facing the summons of destiny. He is blessed with a loving and caring wife (Helena Bonham Carter) and an eccentric speech therapist (Geoffrey Rush--Lionel Logue) who are in solidarity with him in his struggle to get free of the speech impediment, an impediment that not only personally diminishes him but could ultimately have changed history if he had not been able to rally his people in their resolve to stop the spread of fascism.

A major theme of the story told is that of responsibility, and we see this theme played out in the lives of the two sons of George V, one who abdicates his title as king to marry a divorced woman and the second son, Prince Albert, who eventually accepts the royal title with all the demanding responsibility that comes with the honor. The eventuality of kingship for which he prepares himself comes at a cost and requires great courage. The narrative of his suffering on the road to greatness and his transcendence (the passing beyond the condition that has so crippled him) provide us with the film plot, a story of courage and liberation from an oppressive impediment.



The central character in this film is Albert Frederick Arthur George, Prince Albert of York, a character portrayed by Academy Award winner Colin Firth. He is known as Bertie to his family, the royal family of Great Britain. He is the second son of Mary of Teck and King George V, King-Emperor of the British Empire, who became king in 1910 and ruled until his death in 1936. About a fourth of the world's population was included in the British Empire at this time in history. Also, during the period of George V's reign, citizens of the British Empire witnessed the rise of socialism, communism, fascism, Irish republicanism, and the Indian independence movement. It was clearly a tumultuous period in world history.

An additional theme that emerges in the film is that of friendship. We see this friendship in the bond that develops between Prince Albert (Firth) on his journey to becoming King George VI and Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush), the speech therapist who works to liberate the king from his stuttering, an impediment that must be overcome in order to provide the needed leadership for uniting the people and eventually required in opposing the fascism of Nazi Germany. The king essentially is friendless prior to developing ties with Logue, and they remain friends until they die, based on the epilogue provided at the end of the film. Logue's technical skill--skill developed primarily through experience, not academic training--is only one dimension of the therapy. Friendship proves to be an indispensable dimension of George VI's liberation from his humiliating impediment.

Decision (commitment, engagement, resoluteness) is another motif apparent in the film. We see decisiveness displayed in the character of the future Queen Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter), George VI (both before and after his ascension to the throne), and Lionel Logue. Decision by George VI is accompanied with great anxiety, since his decisions require risk and open him to additional humiliation and possible failure. The king manifests his mettle in his decisions that come at a personal cost to him, but are required for advancing the common good of the nation.

Related to the themes in the film of responsibility, friendship (solidarity), and decision is that of freedom. This theme of freedom has several aspects in case of the future king, George VI. One is the freedom that is linked to creativity or transcendence (again, the passing beyond the condition that has so crippled him, as noted above, and opens up new possibilities). Another dimension of freedom is liberation, a setting free from what oppresses. We see these multiple dimensions of freedom play out in the story, especially when the king is working with Logue, certainly an agent of liberation for the king, and when he delivers his speech at the end of the movie; he has transcended the condition that has so crippled him most of his life, becoming the voice of the British Empire. The movie ends with the rousing speech by the king, a speech that calls his nation to the solidarity and sacrifice.

Themes to Engage Through the Film:

- Leadership and sacrifice required in creating national solidarity for the common good.
- Transcendence—creatively moving beyond a current condition or situation and opening up new possibilities for the future.
- The human odyssey and the human solidarity needed to empower those on the journey.
- Despair vs. hope; suspicion vs. trust.
- Individualism vs. the bonds of community.
- The victory of new life over diminishment, death
- Responsibility that requires self-sacrifice.
- Longing for friendship, companionship
- Agents of freedom-giving/liberation.
- “Real family” vs. those only related by blood
- Hospitality: exile-ending/home-bringing
- Fortitude, courage, to overcome impediments and to reach goals.
- Humility.
- The power of modern communication for the common good and to build solidarity for just causes.
- The power of language/speech to make one's self present to others, to be with others.

Catholic Social Teaching Connections:

The King's Speech tells the story that can help us understand freedom, responsibility, solidarity, the importance of speech and language, human limitations, and being resolute in making decisions. This is a film that could help viewers in understanding life in terms of the Paschal Mystery, i.e., death and resurrection, the victory of new life over the power of death in its myriad forms, especially via human diminishment and powerlessness suffered along the way. In spite of the hardships and agonies suffered, we see in the film the power of authentic and sacrificial love in action, a love manifested in more deeds of responsible conduct than in words, to triumph, to make new life--not defeat and death—the final chapter of the story of King George VI and his people. The following social justice and biblical justice themes found in Catholic social teaching can be explored in the film.

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

- In the speech announcing war with Nazi Germany, King George VI reminded the citizens of the British Commonwealth that the “primitive principle” of “might makes right” that had become the modus operandi of Nazi Germany was “fatal to any civilized order,” i.e., to the common good. He continued in his speech in condemning the selfish pursuit of power and warned of justice and liberty being in jeopardy, the bondage of fear that could permeate the world if the ideology of the Nazi prevailed, and destruction of the freedom enjoyed British Commonwealth being endangered by the “might makes right” ideology being advanced by the fascists. The human dignity of millions of people was clearly being threatened.
- The person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society—in economics and politics, in law and policy—directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all.

Solidarity

- The theme of solidarity takes on meaning on several levels in the movie: personal and worldwide. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church notes the relationship of what is commonly referred to as “friendship” and solidarity: “What we nowadays call the principle of solidarity ... is frequently stated by Pope Leo XIII, who uses the term ‘friendship’, a concept already found in Greek philosophy (par. 421). For the king, he enjoyed personal friendship/solidarity with Logue and, of course, his spouse, who was supportive of him from beginning to end. On a worldwide level, we see the principle of solidarity articulated clearly in the final speech of the movie, when the king call for unity in confronting the threat to the common good by fascism.
- We are one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brother and sisters’ keepers, wherever they may be. Loving our neighbor has global dimensions in a shrinking world. At the core of the virtue of solidarity is the pursuit of justice and peace. Pope Paul VI taught that “if you want peace, work for justice.” The Gospel calls us to be peacemakers. Our love for all our sisters and brothers demands that we promote peace in a world surrounded by violence and conflict.

Rights and Responsibilities

- George VI is a paradigm for embracing responsibility. He takes seriously his responsibilities to society, and this comes at a significant personal cost to him. He did not want to be king, but he did not shrink from that responsibility once the inevitable had to be faced. In his last speech in the movie, the speech when he announces the state of war, he has embraced the responsibility that has been thrust upon him. He clearly articulates what is required for the protection of life and human decency, behavior that conforms to accepted standards of justice and morality.
- The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities--to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Conversion (Metanoia)—moving from self-interest to solidarity. How is the story of conversion, or what the Greeks called “metanoia,” entailing a radical change of mind and heart that provides new understanding and motivation for conduct, told in the movie? Consider the Prince Albert’s efforts to avoid becoming king and the anxiety he suffers when he realizes that he must prepare himself for the inevitable.
2. Solidarity vs. Individualism. How is solidarity presented in the film via the characters: Colin Firth (King George VI), Geoffrey Rush (Lionel Logue), Helena Bonham Carter (Queen Elizabeth)? How is egoism manifested via the characters: Guy Pearce (King Edward VIII), Eve Best (Wallis Simpson)
3. The human longing for companionship and friendship. What lessons can be learned by observing the relationship of the king to be with Logue? With his wife? With his children? What role did friendship (the friendship with Logue) play in the liberation of the king from his speech impediment? Was this the reason why Logue was successful and the other speech therapists failed?
4. Hospitality. Who in the movie displays hospitality? Consider the behavior of Logue and his wife toward the king and his wife—providing a place at the table, offering tea and other drinks to the king. Jesuit biblical scholar Brendan Byrne, in this *The Hospitality of God*, declares acceptance of people and not judging them is the essence of hospitality, and it is God’s modus operandi for relating to us, a way of relating that should be our model for relating to one another, making one another feel at home and cherished.
5. Love more in deeds than in words. Saint Ignatius of Loyola: "Love is shown more in deeds than in words." Who in the film manifests authentic love, namely love that is expressed in deeds? What is the relationship of responsibility to love? How would you define love? Greek, the original language for the New Testament, has at least four words for love: the noun *storge* or verb *stergein* have to do with family affection, especially love of parents for children; the noun *philia* and the verb *philein*, best translated as to cherish, to look upon another with affectionate regard; the noun *agape* and the verb *agapan*, words that concern the will, a principle by which someone deliberately lives, entailing benevolence and good will; the noun *eros* and the verb *eran*, words associated with ambition and the intensity of patriotism but usually referencing physical love, and usually connected to physical love. Can you see any of these forms of love in the film in George VI’s love of his daughters? His spouse? His friend Logue? His subjects (in his addresss to them)? Were different aspects of love displayed at different time by the same characters?

