

## Movies for Advent and Christmas

School holidays present a great time for the church to show a Christmas family movie. Viewed this week:

- **I Heard the Bells (2022 – PG)** The tragic life of popular American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is told in this movie. It recounts the background to the *I Heard the Bells* Christmas carol. At the time when America was divided by the Civil War the poet's faith is rekindled by the sound of Christmas bells. Unrelatable characters dampen what is otherwise an inspirational story.

From all the Christmas movies viewed I've selected the range of titles listed below to give you an idea of what is on offer:

- **A Christmas Gift from Bob (2021 - PG)** If you've seen the excellent 2016 movie, *A Street Cat Named Bob* (PG), this film looks a bit like a re-run in Christmas wrapping. Nevertheless, it still makes for entertaining viewing with lots of Christmas spirit.

- **Angela's Christmas (2017 - G)** A big-hearted Irish girl wants to keep baby Jesus warm in this delightful 30-minute animated film. In the sequel **Angela's Christmas Wish (2020 - G)** Angela sets out to unite her family for Christmas - 47 minutes.

- **The Star (2017 - G)** The story of the first Christmas told through a bunch of delightful, animated animals. Voiced by a number of stars including Kelly Clarkson, Oprah Winfrey, Kris Kristofferson and Mariah Carey. The highlight is a superb soundtrack which includes a mixture of traditional and modern Christmas music.

- **Kiwi Christmas (2017 - PG)** This simple family movie is the first New Zealand feature Christmas film. Set in a typical Kiwi summer context, it reinforces the values of family and simplicity. Slapstick and enjoyable for the whole family.

- **A Christmas Star (2015 - G)** When an unscrupulous developer threatens to destroy the character of an Irish village, Noelle, a child who believes she has a gift of

miracles, saves the day. This is a great kids' movie that the whole family can enjoy... with more than a hint of the 1983 film Local Hero (PG).

- **By God's Grace (2014 - NR)** A son inherits his father's air charter service in this modern American take on "A Christmas Carol". The movie is not helped by a rather two-dimensional lead character but the plot builds to a happy ending.

- **Black Nativity (2013 - PG)** In this musical a teen from Baltimore leaves his single mum and travels to Harlem where he spends Christmas with his estranged relatives. A moving story of forgiveness and restoration.

- **The Christmas Candle (2013 - PG)** This movie is based on a Max Lucardo novel. The plot concerns a 'magical' candle that appears once every twenty-five years and brings answered prayer for the person who lights it. Susan Boyle's acting and singing is endearing but the plot is a bit too pedestrian for the kids.

- **The Christmas Bunny (2011 - PG)** A Christian movie about a foster child's bond with a rabbit. Heavy on emotions, but tackles some big themes in a realistic and helpful way.

- **A Christmas Carol (2009 - M)** is Disney's computer-animated version of the Dickens' novel starring Jim Carrey and Colin Firth. While it's visually striking it tends to be a bit dark to screen for the kids... or to engender any joyful Christmas spirit. Other versions of the Dickens' story are too numerous to mention and most are less than memorable. Many are re-telling the story in a contemporary setting like - **Scrooged (1988 - PG)** which stars Bill Murray as a selfish television executive and **A Christmas Carol (2004 - G)**, an old-fashioned-type musical starring Kelsey Grammer and Jennifer Love Hewitt.

- **Nativity (2009 - G)** A British family comedy about a Catholic School's Nativity Play starring Martin Freeman as a schoolteacher who lets things run a little out of control.

- **Nativity 2: Danger in the Manger! (2012 - G)** is the sequel to Nativity (above) this time starring David Tennant. A great laugh-out-loud zany family movie. Supporting actor Mark Wootton (Mr Poppy) shines. Even better than the original... and that is where they should have stopped as **Nativity 3: Dude, Where's my Donkey? (2015 - PG)** with Martin Clunes was embarrassingly bad, and **Nativity 4: Nativity rocks (2018 - G)** was trying hard, but clumsy.
- **What would Jesus Buy? (2007 - PG)** From the producer of Super Size Me comes this documentary on the Church of Stop Shopping and its mission to save Christmas from over-consumption. Funny, fascinating and frightening. It would make a good group discussion starter.
- **The Nativity Story (2006 - PG)**, featuring New Zealand's own Keisha Castle-Hughes deserved better reviews than it got. A beautiful and tasteful retelling of the biblical narrative. It was the first film ever to premier in the Vatican City.
- **The Ultimate Gift (2006 - PG)** This well-crafted family movie brings a balance to the rampant materialism which is often evident in the Christmas season. The plot involves an indulged rich kid who is manipulated by his grandfather's will and learns a few life-lessons along the way. It oozes with sincerity but lacks subtlety.
- **Joyeux Noel (2005 - M)** Set in the first year of World War I this French movie is based on the true story of an unofficial truce that developed on Christmas Eve when enemy soldiers came out of their trenches and fraternised with each other. Depicts the futility of war and the ambivalent role of Christianity. In English, French and German.
- **The Man who Saved Christmas (2002 - PG)** A film based on the fascinating and true story of American toymaker AC Gilbert (of Meccano fame) who was pressured to manufacture munitions instead of toys at the outbreak of World War I. He successfully lobbied the government to allow him to resume the production of toys for Christmas arguing that children need to dream and imagine. Starring Jason Alexander and Ed Asner.

- **How the Grinch Stole Christmas (2000 - PG)** with Jim Carrey, brings alive the Dr Seuss book in a full feature movie. Carrey plays the meanest creature alive (the kids love him). In so doing he attacks the consumerism associated with the season and is eventually redeemed by love. Purists will love the 1966 animated short film by the same name (26 mins) from which the feature movie gets all its good ideas. The 2018 3D brightly coloured, computer animation version, **The Grinch (2018 - G)** received mixed reviews.
  
- **The Vicar of Dibley** Christmas programmes featuring the beloved Dawn French are a treat. My pick is "winter" off The Complete Third Series (1999 - PG). And did you know that there was The Vicar of Dibley in Lockdown (2020) which consisted of three 10-minute episodes with thoughts on Zoom, life and chocolate?
  
- **The First Christmas (1998 - G)** is an absolutely superb clay animation of the Christmas story that runs 21 minutes.
  
- **The Preacher's Wife (1996 - G)** An overworked preacher in a struggling church finds unexpected help in the form of an angel, who despite his good intentions takes a shine to his wife. Starring Whitney Houston and Denzel Washington. Full of warmth and Christmas spirit.
  
- **The Little Drummer Boy (1968 - G)** This is a 27-minute made for television special with stop motion animation that first screened in Canada before Christmas in 1968. The story is based on the popular Christmas song, that was first recorded by the Trapp Family in 1951. To the twenty-first century eye the film-making technique looks distinctly dated, but this doesn't detract from the simple delight of the story. The title song is sung by the Vienna Boys Choir.
  
- **A Charlie Brown Christmas (1965 - G)** Charlie Brown becomes the director of the school Christmas play and discovers the real meaning of Christmas. A 25-minute made for television Christmas special that still retains its magic.
  
- **The Bishop's Wife (1947 - G)** Carey Grant, Loretta Young and David Niven star in this charming Christmas comedy in which an angel (Carey Grant) comes to bring

balance to the lives of a bishop and his wife. If you're looking for a light-hearted classic movie with the Christian values of Christmas you couldn't do better than this.

- **It's a Wonderful Life (1946 - PG)** Finding this Christmas movie was an unexpected delight. Starring James Stewart and Donna Reed it tells of despairing businessman who wished he'd never been born until Clarence, an unlikely angel, helps him see things from a different perspective.