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God's Army

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God's Army

Abstract

This is a review of *God's Army* (2000).

God's Army is a movie about faith. Directed by first-timer Richard Dutcher, a devout Mormon, it is a slice of life movie detailing the crisis of faith experienced by Brandon Allen, a 19 year-old Mormon sent to Los Angeles from Kansas for his two-year missionary duty. There, he boards with other young Mormons and an elder, Marcus Dalton (played by Dutcher, who was himself a missionary).

Marcus, about ten years older, is a father figure and a disciplinarian. He is intense but likeable and brings a seriousness to his duties occasioned by the fact that he is seriously ill with cancer. Also in the group is another young man, Kinegar, who tests his faith by continuously reading books that debunk Mormonism or expose its founder, Joseph Smith, as a fraud.

Brandon's own somewhat shaky faith was bequeathed to him by his stepfather, who has since been jailed on sex crime charges. Brandon wants to believe, wants to have the kind of matter-of-fact faith and certitude that he sees in his mentor, Marcus. But, he has doubts.

Like many missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, he is lonely and uncertain in the first days of his missionary work and decides to leave. Marcus fetches him back from the bus depot--a familiar goodbye spot for rattled young Mormons. Brandon decides to give it another try, but he is distracted by the doubting Kinegar.

God's Army was made on a shoestring budget of about half a million dollars, and shot in just 18 days. Its no-name cast is fresh, interesting, likeable and believable, and the film has the al fresco charm of an independently made movie. Matthew Brown brings an innocence and verisimilitude to Brandon, and Dutcher is perfect as the thin, intense, driven Marcus.

There is quite a bit of humor in the film--frat house style hi-jinks--and Brandon has a mild love interest in a young woman missionary. But the heart of the film is Brandon's struggle with faith. He wants to believe with certainty so that he can get on with his two-year mission. At the same time he is genuinely concerned about Marcus, whose illness can bring on convulsions that require hospitalization. Brandon prays intensely to God the Father and finally achieves a relaxation of tension and doubt, a calm conversion to certainty.

The missionaries interact pleasantly with a range of people as they work the streets of Los Angeles in their black suits, white shirts and ties. Brandon has new resolve, a quiet faith that brooks no doubt--and he thanks God for that. The eventual disaffection of the doubter, Kinegar (Michael Buster) does not shake him, nor does he have any interest in the doubter's books--because his faith is inward and beyond books or factual proofs. He knows in his heart that he is on the right path.

Near the end of the film there is a faith healing of one of the group's acolytes, but this rather impressive event is not vital to Brandon, for his faith has already been tried and proven. The healing is icing on the cake. So strong is his faith that he will be able to carry on even if Marcus should falter or die.

God's Army is offbeat, fresh and original, and has been well received by film critics. It is a rare movie dealing directly with religious doubt, faith and certitude, and it is very ably directed and acted. References to some articles of Mormon faith may confuse a few viewers, but the main theme is universal, rather than parochial.

God's Army is the first production of Zion Films, a Mormon production company that has as its purpose the production of "Mormon masterpieces which will strengthen the faith of our 11 million members worldwide."