



# BELLE

## Synopsis

*Belle* is inspired by the true story of Dido Elizabeth Belle, the illegitimate daughter of a deceased African slave woman and the British Naval officer, Sir John Lindsay. The film opens with Lindsay pleading with Lord Mansfield, Lindsay's uncle and England's Chief Justice, to raise his mixed-race daughter in the manner befitting his aristocratic lineage.

Although Dido's lineage provides her the comfort of certain entitlements, she is regarded as above the servants but below the inhabitants of the house. Living in two worlds at once, Dido begins to question the inequality of her position. She meets and grows more involved with John Davinier, the son of the vicar who is beneath her social level. This bright and politically minded idealist opens her eyes to the horrors of slavery and the case of the 1781 Zong massacre where an estimated 142 African slaves were purposely drowned by their owners in order to claim the loss of their property in an insurance scheme. Together, Dido and John help to shape Lord Mansfield's decision on the outcome of the case and the cause of abolishing slavery in England.

*Belle* brilliantly emphasizes the fact that the history of slavery is part of our global history and its effects are being felt even today. It is important to note that the story behind the movie was inspired by artist Johann Zoffany's 18th century portrait of two beautiful, young English ladies, draped in silk and pearls – one is white and the other is biracial.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In what ways does the film shed light on the principles of Christian teachings on human dignity, solidarity, rights and responsibilities?
2. A low point in human history occurred in 1781 when the crew of British slave ship Zong began to dump an estimated 142 living human slaves overboard to die an “accidental death” and claim the loss on an insurance policy. When you hear of this act, what feelings stir within you? Can you think of another moment in our human history where a profit driven system has trumped human life and dignity?
3. What do you know about slavery that still exists in today’s world in such forms as labor or sex trafficking? Compare the characteristics of modern day slavery with those aspects of America’s past with slavery. When it comes to understanding the complex issues like slavery, why is it important to look at the past?
4. There is a scene in the movie where Dido is looking at herself in the mirror. Distraught, she tries to wipe away her skin color with her hands. In this scene, Dido realizes that she will never be fully accepted into the society she was brought into by her father. What in others treatment of her led to this moment for her? In your personal life and parish community, how are people of other nationalities welcomed? Are all treated equally? Why or why not? Reflect on a time when you witnessed another person being treated unjustly because of his/her skin color?
5. In what ways are you aware of your racial/ethnic background? In what ways has your racial/ethnic background shaped your current values, habits, practices, ways of worship, and personal priorities?
6. How has racism affected your life in specific, tangible ways? How does your Christian faith affect the way you feel or think about issues of modern day slavery, inequality, and racial injustice?
7. At times, saying what you truly believe will make you unpopular or even ostracize you from a group to which you hope to belong. Did this situation occur in the film? If so, how? Think of a time when you lacked the courage to voice your belief on a particular issue to avoid an argument or to appease another. How did you feel after the fact? What could you have done differently?
8. It is said that inequality has been part of every generation. Do you agree or disagree? Why? Think of examples in the Old Testament where one group is dominant over the other and where women are deemed the property of men. How relevant is inequality in today’s world?

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