

Review

film: *I, Daniel Blake*

I, *Daniel Blake* makes for uncomfortable watching. It follows the fictional story of Daniel Blake, who is told by his doctor he is unfit to return to work following a heart attack. But when he applies for medical disability benefit, he is refused. We follow Daniel as he, and young mother of two, Katie, struggle to negotiate the seemingly complex and robotic welfare system.

This is clearly a film with an agenda, so I should be upfront about mine straight from the off. As an actual doctor performing the medical assessments for the benefit which Daniel is refused, there were some parts of the film that left me furious, and others that left me heartbroken. I'll address the latter below before dealing with the former.

This film spotlights rising poverty in the UK, with real world food bank usage rising 13% in 2018¹ and some 14 million people said to be living in poverty.² I applaud how the film challenges the damaging stereotypes of those claiming benefits as lazy, work-shy or 'scroungers'. This narrative is pushed by political groups and unfairly shames some of the most vulnerable in society. Both the main characters are like many, victims of poor circumstance and timing, and not at fault for their situation.

At every turn, Daniel is confronted by the bureaucracy of the system he is in, struggling both against his computer illiteracy in a digital age, and the mountain of red tape installed to try to discourage the dishonest, while protecting the deserving.

I agree with director Ken Loach, in his uncompromising portrayal of UK poverty, and



about the flawed system we currently have. He does however, border on demonising those working in the system, and whilst I'm deeply saddened if this is experienced by even a minority, it is certainly not the norm.

The way Daniel's medical is conducted is frankly appalling and utterly unacceptable. However, I have never seen or experienced anything even close to this. The whole thing is a 'how-not-to' example, and

while we only see a snapshot of his assessment, it is very clearly aiming to look incompetent. From a job centre employee being disciplined for showing basic human kindness, to the ever-looming government 'decision-maker' used like a Damoclean sword by staff, it would all be laughable, if it wasn't so insulting to those who try and guide some of the vulnerable through hardship and difficult times.

I, Daniel Blake is a film that dramatises events to create the saddest possible narrative with which to make its point. But it is also a stark reminder of the rising gap between rich and poor, and that social justice requires more than just paying our taxes. It's a reminder that we need to look at our greed as a society to ask why we feel more comfortable having 'subcontracted' such charity to the state. It's a reminder that we need to love our neighbour, and that as Christians our neighbour may not always live next door. ■

James Howitt is a doctor working in benefits assessment and CMF Associate Staff Worker

REFS

1. The Trussell Trust. End of Year Stats (2018-2019). bit.ly/2srmRXP
2. Social Metrics Commission. A new measure of poverty for the UK. September 2018. bit.ly/2xnjYvt