

## **"And they were terrified" ... the text of the sermon delivered by Bishop Peter at Chester Cathedral on Christmas Day 2010**

Many of you will have watched at least one episode of 'The Nativity' over the past week, an attempt to recast the Christmas story in the form of a 'soap opera'.

The scriptwriter, Tony Jordan, is best known for his work on East Enders. I understand that he has written over 250 episodes. I won't reveal how many of these episodes I have watched, although I do know the answer! But this week I have managed to watch a couple of the episodes of The Nativity, and I have been fascinated by how he adapted the story for a prime time BBC audience.

Of course, any playwright or screenwriter will employ a certain artistic licence, in order to emphasise the meaning and message which he or she wishes to convey. In this case – as one might expect, given the circumstances of today's society - there was quite a lot of additional material about family tensions, especially related to Mary's unplanned pregnancy, out of wedlock. But overall I was struck by how faithful the script remained to the New Testament. There was a clear sense that the essentials of the story – the core which you find in the New Testament itself – could not be changed without changing the story itself, which would have destroyed the whole purpose of the artistic project. The additional elements were there to spread the programme over 4 episodes, and to point up the central plot – much as later Christian tradition added the oxen, asses, and camels, which are not to be found in the New Testament, or turned the wise men into kings – again a tradition which is not in the New Testament.

The screenwriter, Tony Jordan, was interviewed recently, and he did not set out to provide a defence of the traditional story as such, but in a strange and interesting way that's how it emerged. He said that as he retold and recast the story he could only acknowledge it as 'beautiful'.

Let me take an aspect of the story which has sometimes been controversial in recent times, the fact that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin, without a human father.

When I was being trained for Christian ministry I encountered many modern writers and theologians who made much of casting doubt on the virgin birth. There was even the odd – very odd – Bishop who would air his doubts. But the dramatisation this week, by an experienced scriptwriter with no particular theological axe to grind, left us in no doubt that the virgin birth is an essential and core element of the story.

The story is about God's incarnation, God's birth in our world in the person of the unique Son of God – it is the story of God's direct and definitive revelation of himself: nothing less, and nothing else. That's why the wise men were drawn a great distance – Tony Jordan called it 1000 miles – into dangerous territory in order to bring their gifts. That's why the shepherds, the destitute semi-outcasts according to his dramatisation, were chosen to bear their special witness to the birth of the Messiah, amid their awe and fear at the visit of the Angel.

And they were terrified....

Take the virgin birth out of the story, and it would have become a very different story, of teenage pregnancy, of infidelity, or whatever. A work-a-day story and not a supernatural story of the birth of God. How easy, one might have thought, for a contemporary script writer for East Enders to tell the story that way – but it would have been to tell it not so much slant, as upside down.

At one level the story can be regarded as nonsensical. God born as a baby? And what's more born in the filth, squalor and cold of a stable? Born to an unknown peasant girl who wasn't even married? Born to die in shame on a cross – that made it much worse still. How ridiculous it seemed to the intellectuals, the chattering classes, 2000 years ago. Some of them are still alive today, I notice, but more on Radio 4, or Channel 4, than on prime time television on BBC1.

But the critics have their point, and even bear their distinctive witness to the story. It is shocking – just as Joseph's family was shocked that he should stand by the pregnant Mary. It is disturbing, just

as Herod was deeply disturbed at the thought that another King might arise to compete with him. And it gets much worse when you take the story through to the Cross.

No wonder the first followers of Jesus were mocked and derided – real Gods, according to the established religions 2000 years ago, Jewish, Greek, or Oriental alike, were not born as babies, and didn't die the death of a common criminal. They didn't die at all, and they weren't born of a woman in the first place.

We need to be reminded that Christians were first called Christians as a term of abuse – followers of that slightly nutty, way-out itinerant Jewish preacher called Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Roman authorities had put to death. Christians were first called Christians at Antioch, the Book of Acts tells us, by those who mocked them, and urged their persecution. Christians were first called Christians rather as we might call Moonies Moonies – followers of a way-out, slightly dangerous nutter who rejoices in the name of Mr Moon.

So why is this a 'beautiful' story, as Tony Jordan put it? Because it's our story, the inner story of our world, of our lives. We are not the Son of God, but as human beings we are God's sons and daughters by adoption, made in his image, embraced and taken into his family, invited to share his Christmas lunch as celebrated in this Eucharist, and in the million other Eucharists celebrated in Churches around the world this Christmas Day.

The beauty and the terror, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the expectation of the Jews and the total surprise at the manner in which it was fulfilled, the joy of a baby's birth and the shadow of the Cross, the presence of a Creator who becomes part of his creation: it's these heights and depths which colour the beauty of Christmas.

The key, I think, is not to domesticate it too much, not to make it too twee, too nice – to see in it the beauty of holiness, and not just the beauty of mistletoe and mince pies, although they also have their place at the messianic banquet.

If we would see Jesus, we need also to sense something of the awe and wonder, the surprise and terror, of the first Christmas, so powerfully captured for me in this week's retelling on our televisions.

And so, if anyone should ask you over lunch to day about this morning's service, or even this morning's sermon, just say that it was beautiful – and that you were terrified.

The Rt Revd Dr Peter Forster.