Article

The Nativity Play – who needs it?

Janet Turner reflects on the traditional Nativity play and raises questions about what it says to both adults and children.

by
Janet Turner

We've all been there. One Sunday morning in Advent, the church is packed, full of regular attenders and visitors. There is an air of anticipation and excitement. For once, the pews at the front are in great demand and, after the opening formalities, it begins. Young children re-enact a Christmas story: Mary and Joseph struggling, a surly inn-keeper, shepherds wrapped in dressing gowns with tea-towels and ties for head-dresses. Three kings enter bearing gifts of talcum power, a football and a cuddly toy for the baby Jesus. The angels, usually girls, thoroughly enjoy twirling round in their white frocks at the risk of losing their tinsel haloes and pinned-on wings. The animals, also known as those children who didn't get a starring role, make an almost realistic zoo. At every appearance of a new set of children, the 'Ah' factor grows in the same proportion to the number of cameras (when permitted) and camcorders, which flash and whirr, adding hugely to the showing-off of the extroverts and the excruciating embarrassment of the shy. Entertainment value is added by the child who does something impromptu or, better yet, that she/he shouldn't. We all know that this bit of the story will be retold for many years to come, perhaps when she/he is bringing the new boy/girlfriend round to tea for the first time.

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Three cheers for spontaneity and the rebel who refuses to dress up, sing or recite the lines, despite the coaxing from the front row. The tableau makes its way to the grand finale. Songs and hymns are sung by the children but mouthed by the 'audience', half of whom have heard the practice at home for weeks. On to the cup of tea in the hall – parents and children's workers exhausted and thankful it is over for another year, while the children are full of excitement and will take hours to calm down. All that remains is the development of the film for the family album and making space for the video to sit alongside last year's holiday adventures.

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Why do we do it?

What is it all about? One father described his son's taking part in his first Nativity play as a rite of passage, rather like going to see his first proper football match with his dad. Others, who have a rather naïve understanding of church-going, think it might be an evangelistic opportunity. 'Perhaps some of those who are here today will want to come back to church again!' There is, of course, the familiar old stand-by, 'Well, it wouldn't be Christmas without the children doing the Nativity play, would it?' Oh really?

So, what is it really all about? Who is it really for? What are the messages it conveys to those who come? It takes no great working out to realize that the cast of characters in the Gospel accounts were all adults, with the only child a tiny scrap of humanity. Add twenty years onto every child who takes part in the church and school Nativity play, and the story changes radically. However, we do not seem to find that idea sensible. We appear to have this great need to 'dumb down' a mysterious and curious event which, in real time, comes across as a flashlight going off in a darkened room.

What message are we transmitting?

Some of the adults who come to support their child or grandchild may rarely, if ever, set foot in church at any other time. What message do they receive? Could it be that nothing has changed in the Church since they were children, and that Jesus remains a silent, tiny bundle around whom all this revolves, saying nothing? How far might this coincide with their memory of the Jesus in the faded pictures on walls of the Sunday School room of childhood? They remain clear even in the memories of those who have continued to develop mature faith in adulthood.

What of those parents who may have grown up with little awareness of Church at all? What will they make of the Nativity play performed by their child in school? Is it a nice fairy story? An ancient legend? A safe activity which introduces young children to the social skills of co-operation and memory training?

What of the young participants? What will they learn of the real story? We know that many will depart from Church influence by the age of 11 or so, having already learned much from school about the sciences, which frequently lead them to challenge the claims

of the Bible, putting Church children's workers on their mettle. Are they too left with an impression that the Christian faith centres round a person who is soft and perhaps not worth knowing?

What of the 'audience' who are men and women of deep and tested faith? Is the children's Nativity play for them a diversion from the deeper exploration of the mystery of Incarnation; a search for light in the darkest time of the year; a celebration of yet another way in which God's creativity has influenced and shaped our thoughts, emotions and very being?

A need for change

The time has come to rescue Nativity from the Nativity play and think of other ways in which we can value children in the Church. Let's not just repeat the things of the past, in which children are seen to be heard only when we want them to entertain us on 'special Sundays'. I believe it is time to stop being tyrannized by attitudes which say that there is something wrong if we don't have the children do this play, because it has always been so. If truth were told, is this not more to do with pleasing adults rather than children? We are all aware that childhood experience influences deeply. I have yet to meet the adult whose faith was first awakened by playing a shepherd or angel, but there are some whose experience of church was made a negative one by being made to perform as a child.

On the other hand, we know that the Christmas story is not another 'Once upon a time' story and perhaps the time has come to reclaim Nativity from the absurdity of the Nativity play.

Where is the truth?

We need to excavate through the strata of imagery, imagined and conditioned through centuries of European art and Dickensian scenes on Christmas cards. Since the Christmas story is here to stay, an exploration of the Gospel accounts, reflecting on the authorship and readership of the Gospel writers, can bear fruit. Exploring meaning is often fraught with difficulty, since meaning is never fixed or static. It shifts and slides, taking on newer and different colours over time and space. In our present age, we are conditioned to look at beliefs and opinions with a rational, logical mind which seems to need to deconstruct every word. Children are taught that the creation story in Genesis chapter 1 does not 'square' with the Big Bang and evolutionary theories; therefore Genesis is wrong. Logic dictates, therefore, that the whole Bible is also wrong! The meaning of the Nativity accounts may well receive the same treatment as children develop their ability to reason, unless they engage in a different way of understanding the story.

The heart of Nativity is mysterious and unknown. Commentators and Bible scholars can shed much light on these accounts, exploring every nook and cranny of the language and syntax. Ultimately, though, they too admit that they don't know what happened either. This allows us to put to one side our late 20th century scientific, rational minds and allow creative imagination to lead us into this New Testament Genesis. Who were Matthew and Luke writing for? What were they trying to transmit? What was their own context and culture? By exploring the 'poetics' (the signs and symbols) and the 'politics' (the context and times), other ways of looking come into focus.

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Signs and symbols

The original 'audience' were not like us. Living at the crossroads of North, South, East and West of the 'known world', their world-view was shaped and coloured by the language, legends and spiritualities of many peoples. For them, the Old Testament was not old, but the story of themselves recounted through poetry and prose, and it was lived out daily. Signs and symbols were not incredible. Jews of that time knew about miraculous births. After all, didn't Mary repeat the words of Hannah in the *Magnificat*, reinforcing their knowledge that God can work in ways that are not humanly possible? So what, they might say to us! A young woman, reproductively mature, surely could bring forth a son, if God wanted it to be done that way.

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And why wouldn't angels bring messages through dreams, and the stars in the firmament tell a story to those able to read them? Wise men, shepherds and angelic choruses located in Herod's domain would resonate clearly with a readership who loved to hear stories full of signs and symbols. These they could reflect upon and make connections with their faith and belief-system.

The heart of Nativity is mysterious and unknown

The context and the times

As for the 'politics' of the story, both Matthew and Luke had an agenda. Jesus needed to be connected to the story of the Jewish people, and therefore we have the genealogy of Joseph, through whom there is a direct line to David, also a shepherd in his day, as well as a great king of Israel. This could take the listeners to Jesus as the good

shepherd. Perhaps the appearance of the shepherds in the story served to remind people of this connection. They also affirm the Christian message that God's son is accessible to the poorest and most humble. And so Jesus can be seen as the fulfilment of ancient prophecies and a personification of the hopes of Israel and the continuity of the nation – perhaps even a greater Moses, who will lead his people to freedom.

Does the threat from Herod represent a pointer to the disturbance Jesus was to become in the future?

The wise men, foreign, exotic and strange, could also be a symbol of the Other, pointing to a new Church which would be open to Gentiles as well as Jews, and so there also appears a discontinuity. Does the threat from Herod represent a pointer to the disturbance Jesus was to become in the future?

The heart of the Nativity

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There are, no doubt, many other ways of 'reading' the story but, however we choose to do that, there can be no denying that God is at the heart of it all, the Holy Spirit moving, creating, dancing through all the characters, inviting every reader to journey into and gaze upon the story, time and time again. Is it possible that those who attend a children's Nativity play find something deep within their spirits stirring beyond the dressing up and out-of-tune singing? Do we insist on the children playing the parts because we want to be drawn back to our own innocent age of childhood and simply listen to stories being told to us? Far from being a nostalgia trip, do we use the children to be re-connected with our own innate sense of awe and wonder, which never felt so strong as when, as children, we gazed up into a starry sky on a dark midwinter's evening? If there is some truth in this, then let's set about Nativity differently. We need to accept that 20th century rationalism and proof simply do not work here. We ought to reclaim that which still lies deep within our folk memories and explore again the signs and symbols of this ancient story, what they may have meant then and what they do mean now. There are plenty of commentaries available, not to mention trained theologians, to offer help, advice and informed guesswork. Once we are ourselves equipped, we need to be as humble as the shepherds and as wise as the wise men, sit down quietly and listen to the children. Let's not dress them up in our adult versions of what we think, which usually end up as a childish way of enacting the story. Instead, we need to use our best enabling skills to help the children tell us the story with their own voices, spirits and special angle on the truth. Instead of reproducing the usual Nativity play like we've always done as an entertainment or performance, perhaps... just perhaps... we will become an audience of listeners while the children assume that age-old role of story-tellers, recounting for us an occasion when God came into the world and turned it upside-down forever.

We need to help the children tell us the story with their own voices, spirits and special angle on the truth

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(Bibliography prepared by Ruth Yeoman.)