

Nativity on BBC One this Christmas

Colleagues

I went to the press preview screening of the BBC/Red Planet series The Nativity at the end of October. The good news is that it is wonderful television. And it opens up an astonishing evangelistic opportunity for us.

My main message is that we can commend it to every church as something they can recommend with total confidence to their congregations and (even more importantly) those with whom they are in touch beyond their churches.

It's in four episodes that will be broadcast on BBC1 in middle of the evening in the week leading up to Christmas Eve. And it is going to do more to promote Christian faith in this country than all the sermons of the year put together. It is that good!

Churches need to be geared up to the fact that their major opportunity to present the gospel this year may not be at a carol service held on Sunday 19 December (which will be before the series has been broadcast) but on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day (when I anticipate that people who have watched the series may want to come to church looking to find out what it all means for them).

Basically the serial tells the stories as they have been handed down to us with straightforward acceptance of them as true. It fills out the back-story with motivations and emotions in order to make it entirely credible. Admittedly, it does incorporate two thousand years of tradition that has gathered around the story (for example, there is a donkey, Mary ends up in blue, all the characters end up squashed in a stable, and so on). But the fact that it declares that this baby is going to save humankind from its sins is so overpowering that all the embellishments become part of the credibility, not distracting.

It is not just moving, it is funny (very), believable (totally), sexy (yes!), tense and profoundly full of the grace of God. And the awe of God too - the writer Tony Jordan has worked a miracle. Half way through each episode the camera pans back way out into the cosmos, and you hear deep groans, as if something tremendously significant is happening in both heaven and earth. And it ends with a declaration that because of this birth, the salvation of humankind is on its way. Then you hear the voice of the adult Jesus reciting the Beatitudes.

I started crying half way through the third episode (when Mary's father, who doesn't even exist in the Bible version, stands by his daughter even though she is in disgrace). And by the end of episode four (when ... actually, I don't want to spoil it) I was drowning. Fact! So was everyone.

At the preview they interviewed Tony Jordan (creator of Life on Mars and writer of Eastenders). He said: 'I've always had a faith. I'm not a

God-botherer ... But I do believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. I do believe he came here to take away our sins. I absolutely believe that. But there's loads of little bits around it that bug me. So what I've done with the story of the nativity is written a version that I can believe.

'And I believe that the people who watch it who aren't already sold, who would ridicule another version with square beards, [will find that] I've made it accessible. So they can watch it and see it's truthful, and say, "You know what! That's really cool. I never realised it could be like that. I thought it was all beyond me." ... Watch it, believe it, invest in it, and sob like a child.'

I did. You will.

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Stars align for Tony Jordan's Nativity on BBC One this Christmas

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Andrew Buchan (Garrow's Law, Cranford), **Peter Capaldi** (In The Loop, The Thick of It) and rising star **Tatiana Maslany** (Cra\$h & Burn, A Grown Up Movie Star) have been cast in a magical re-telling of the classic Nativity story.

Written by **Tony Jordan** (Life On Mars, Hustle, EastEnders) for **BBC One** this Christmas and produced by **Red Planet Pictures** in association with **Kudos** through **BBC Wales**.

Over four half-hour episodes the drama will tell the traditional tale known to millions from a very human perspective. With Mary and Joseph's enduring love story at the centre this familiar story is given a contemporary twist, as the drama follows Joseph and Mary from their initial courtship – Joseph desperate to win the heart of Mary – to his emotional turmoil at her unexpected pregnancy.

Tony Jordan said: "The challenge for me was to retell a story that has been told countless times before, a story that everyone knows intimately, yet to do so in a way that will still surprise and move you, to see parts of the story you'd never seen before. I really think that we've achieved that and I'm incredibly proud to have been asked by the BBC to be involved in such a wonderful project."

This gripping and vibrant adaptation will show the Nativity from a fresh viewpoint, highlighting how seemingly ordinary people reacted to the extraordinary and miraculous events that befell them.

Rich in colour and humour the remarkable events that led up to Jesus's birth will unfold across the four nights. From the epic journey of the wise men to the poignant tale of Thomas – a poor

shepherd – whose waning faith in God is revived as he kneels beside the crib of the new born king. Jordan's Nativity is a spectacular Christmas treat for the whole family.

Ben Stephenson, Controller, BBC Drama Commissioning added: "We are proud to bring audiences this beautiful story retold for Christmas 2010 by a master story-teller. We hope our version of the Nativity will give audiences all the wonder, magic and inspiration of the original whilst also telling a less familiar tale, that of ordinary people going about their lives with no sense of the enormous importance their story would hold for centuries to come."

An impressive cast joins Andrew Buchan as Joseph; Tatiana Maslany as Mary and Peter Capaldi as Balthasar. Including: **Jack Shepherd** (Wycliffe) as Melchior; **Obi Abili** (The Take) as Gaspar; **Art Malik** (Agatha Christie: Poirot, Holby City) as Nicolaus; **Vincent Regan** (Clash Of The Titans) as Herod; **John Lynch** (Mo, Bleak House) as Gabriel; **Claudie Blakely** (Lark Rise To Candleford) as Anna; **Frances Barbour** (Agatha Christie: Poirot, The Street) as Elizabeth; **Neil Dudgeon** (Life Of Riley) as Joachim; **Al Weaver** (Five Daughters) as Thomas the Shepherd; **Ruth Negga** (Five Daughters) as Leah and **Gawn Grainger** (Lords And Luddites) as Levi.

Filming begins on location in Morocco next month, the drama is produced by **Ruth Kenley-Letts**, Tony Jordan and **Jane Featherstone** are Executive Producers for Red Planet Pictures and **Bethan Jones** is Executive Producer for the BBC. The Nativity was commissioned by Ben Stephenson, Controller, BBC Drama Commissioning, and **Jay Hunt**, Controller, BBC One.

A Red Planet Pictures Production in Association with Kudos Film and Television and Temple Street Productions, K Films and CBC.

Notes to Editors

Tatiana Maslany won critical acclaim at this year's Sundance Film Festival for her role in, A Grown Up Movie Star; she was awarded a special jury prize for breakout performance.

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