

Christward

The magazine of



January 10th–February 28th

2021

~ 'Angel Voices'

A review of the the Christmas Sketch ~

Within the world of 'The Arts' there is a debate which has probably been around since time immemorial. The crux of which is this: does suffering create art? Is it a pre-requisite? Is it true that in times of darkness the art that people produce shines at its brightest? Certainly there are many great painters, musicians, writers and composers who are often described as "troubled" and whose controversial personal lives are just as well known as the works of art they create. But perhaps that is because a dark, brooding personality just sells better than someone who writes well and leads a generally happy life. Anyway, this writer digresses, what I have observed is that in a time of uncertainty when all around us appears bleak and grey people have used the opportunity to find different platforms and outlets for their art and creativity. Nowhere is this more true than the Union Chapel Players' annual nativity. The inability to rehearse in person would not stop them, the technological challenges would not stop them, in short the pandemic did not stop them. And this writer for one is delighted it did not. Redhouse used the context of the pandemic in which to set his play with the angels of heaven trying to organise a celebration of the birth of Jesus. Earnshaw, Gowers and Howes Jr took on the main roles of the angels and Quinn Hamilton provided superb comic relief as the cherub who was insistent that the angels should provide him with a carol. Redhouse reflected the overriding mood of the pandemic in the piece; the constant shifting and changing of plans and policies at a rate at which no human (and indeed no angelic presence) could keep up with. Audience members were advised to watch the play through the "active speaker" mode on zoom. This enabled the audience to connect deeply with each character as well as favouring the talents of Earnshaw, Gowers and Howes as the audience was able to appreciate each backhanded comment and sarcastic eye roll close up. The fusion of film and theatre here has not gone unnoticed or unappreciated. This writer

particularly enjoyed the barbed lines between Earnshaw and Howes- a nod in itself to how easy it is to misunderstand or miss completely what has been said on a zoom call. Carole Walker made a guest appearance as 'carol' a lovely self-referential nod to Redhouse's previous work which followers of his oeuvre will be much pleased with. It was also a joy to have Gowers in the cast for the Christmas season- she is a firm favourite in the summer season and the mode of the performance this year enabled her to join for this production. Howes Snr served to bookend the piece introducing it to the viewer and leading us all in a piece of marvellous audience participation at the close of the play- a jazz interpretation of the ending song that usually draws a mystery play to a close. In a year that has been difficult for everyone it was an event that brought much joy to many and for this writer reaffirmed the sense of community that exists between its currently separated members.

It is perhaps too much to hope that Redhouse and the Union Chapel Players' Easter offering will be conducted in person but you can rest assured that a poxy global pandemic will not stop these artistes in their quest to shine a light in the darkness.

Rachel Eeckelaers

Printed below is the song which ended the show. It was written and sung by Andy. If you did not see the play it is an excellent summary but more than that it's a message of hope in what our reviewer called 'a time of uncertainty'. 'The play's the thing, when Hope is tough'.

Angel voices - Epilogue

Our play is ended

*The story has been a little bended:
A birth was coming for all nations
And angels planned the celebrations*

*But Gloria was keen on choirs
While Pax was hoping for more fires
As she planned something quite fantastic
Excelsis was somewhat sarcastic*

*Pax thought that Rome would be selected
Where power and warfare intersected
Bethlehem's not what they expected
But God has chosen the neglected*

***Hey says the cherub, Heynona Ho
Christmassy Angels, what do you know?***

*The angels thought they had it sorted
But their initial plans were thwarted
Five days before this birth desirous
Heaven's infected with a virus*

*And now the problem of existence
Is keeping greater social distance
The shepherds cannot bring their flock down
If heaven's breaking out of lockdown*

*Wise men would need a course correction
If guiding stars caught the infection
Cherubs would sit in online scho-ol
And heavenly hosts run out of fu-el.m*

***Hey says the cherub, Heynona Ho
Christmassy Angels, what do you know?***

*The angels sit and watch a black screen
When news comes in about a vaccine
And though it's made somewhere belo-ow
The news sets seraphim aglo-ow.*

*The angels have been quite angelic
But now they're turning psychedelic
They have some far pleasanter tasks now
They can take off those tiring masks now*

*They're looking on to 2020
And Trump is gone – four years was plenty.
And turbines turn and neighbours natter
And people see that Black Lives Matter.
And hope stands where there was a statue
And hope's alive and looking at you.*

***Hey says the cherub, Heynona Ho
Christmassy Angels, what do you know?***

*Our thoughts roll on to Christmas Day
A different time, a different play.
Both very young and long of tooth -
We've taken liberties with the truth.
To peer ahead seems quite enough -
The play's the thing, when hope is tough.
And so we know you would have missed us -
And so we wish you Merry Christmas.*

~ Snippets of Hebrew ~

Reading A Bit Deeper

Are the benefits of learning Hebrew limited to spotting translation anomalies? Everyone knows there are translation difficulties, and that they are inevitable. You can't translate poetry very well at all. And no matter how well you may know a language, ancient or modern, and even though you may have lived in the country of the language you have learned to perfection, Russia for example, and understand the cultural significance of its idioms, you are not Russian. You have not experienced being Russian, you were not born there, it is not your native tongue, you can never experience being Russian. You can only experience being a Westerner who lives in Russia.

But there are things that everyone understands, and these things have a vocabulary of their own, happiness, sadness, joy, depression, delight, and all languages understand these experiences, because they are universal, and they are not culturally dependant. They are part of our experience. But try explaining to an alien what joy is! A comedian could have a field day with this task. Explaining what a tree is, would not cause us much difficulty. But the more abstract the concepts become, the harder it is to communicate.

There is a level on which the Bible communicates in the same way. Parables and history of people, being born, dying, winning, losing, rich and poor, struggling, eating, sleeping, drinking, walking, losing and finding. We instinctively know what the stories are about. Such stories have dignity,

authenticity, resonance, integrity and a ring of truth with no need for explanations. And the things we cannot find words for are described by such stories. A story is only of interest because it is always about us. Our hopes, joys, sorrows, disappointments. Our joys tell us what we like, and our sorrows tell us what we don't like, but sorrows and disappointments can open a window to a deeper aspect.

And so why do we care about the story of a people who were enslaved in Egypt and escaped? Why do we care about another village with its own local history where a perceptive resident did something for which the village has been grateful ever since? Because it is the story of every village. And the Bible contains our story, and everyone's story.

So, think of the very first story!

We were born innocent and helpless and we awake to a practical reality. Naked we came into the world and naked we will leave, said Job, chapter 1 v 21. Everything else seems to be commentary.

And so for some commentary!

We lose our innocence

We start to say "No!" very early, at about age 2. But saying "yes" is meaningless, unless we can say no. Sometimes we say no, by our actions, like disobeying.

We become embarrassed without clothes on.

We grow up to find out how much effort is required just to live.

We experience pain, from thorns, other people, childbirth.

We learn of poison, from the snake and plants.

We learn about death.

We awaken to an understanding of good and evil.

When we feel vulnerable we cover ourselves, with metaphorical leaves, and then by something more substantial like a metaphorical animal skin. Since the literal animal skin came from God in the story, of the garden of Eden, what does the metaphorical skin represent? We try distractions, then numb our feelings if the distractions don't take it away. If only we could understand why it might all seem better. Religion and philosophy may turn out to be sophisticated attempts to find such an answer.

In other words, this is just like the garden of Eden. Perhaps the garden of Eden account was a way of saying that "life is what it is", and you have to accept it, because you cannot fight against it. Even if you were to have had a perfect start! And that may be the core of everything.

So the Bible is a written account of life drama as experienced by one nation coming into being. A film does not make a good book. A book does not make a good film. Transferring art from one medium to another may lose more than it gains. But as a means of further examination, additional gems may be revealed. So examination of the Bible stories may yield more benefit than a more accurate translation could, because if we don't understand the very human elements of the story, we are unlikely to fair much better with a more accurate translation.

It seems rather like trying to understand the material realm, knowing that 96% of all energy and matter cannot be accounted for, so it is described as dark energy and dark matter. Who would imagine that anyone would think of claiming that we are close to knowing the workings and the origins of the universe on the basis of 4% of it? It has been said, "Not only is the Universe stranger than we think, it is stranger than we *can* think."

The Bible has majestic themes, grand concepts with existential impact. It is a written version of looking at the night sky where we can see things that are so far away, that travelling at the speed of light for a lifetime will not get you there. Studying the Bible for a life time will not get you there either.

As for getting there, well we don't even know where the "there is". Where is the "there" that we think we might get to? Jesus disciples asked where he was going, and his reply distracted them from a destination. It was not a location, nor an understanding. He embodied "The way, the truth and the life". A finite mind cannot comprehend the infinite. Maybe the Bible itself offers the best we can do. "For now, we see through a glass, darkly".

The majestic, the mysterious and the transcendent are all there, as we saw in the reading of the opening words of John's gospel recently. Such beauty, such awe. Nothing can diminish that.

Is there more to learning Hebrew than spotting translation anomalies? Yes, it helps to open a door, a door that will open to any who seek. That's what doors do! And it is independent of language.

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and the door shall be opened unto you.

Geoff Walker

~ The Ten Commandments ~

Some weeks ago, after a service which considered the Ten Commandments, Abigail sent me a version of the Decalogue which had been written to place them in a modern context and idiom. David and Margaret printed it in the Order of Service one Sunday and I have printed it below.

1. practice loyalty to the Sacred
2. remember every image of God is only a glimpse
- 3 do not use God's name to do harm
4. do not allow productivity to dominate life
5. care for those who have cared for you and honour those who have paved your way
- 6 do not be unnecessarily destructive
- 7 be faithful to the commitments you make
- 8 do not take what does not belong to you
- 9 do not hinder justice from coming to fruition
- 10 do not use power over others to get what you want

There have been many rewritings of the Commandments over the years. Some have been attempts to update them and to make them more relevant. Some to make them understandable to the generation to which they have been aimed. Some have been humorous and have no further ambition than to make people laugh. Some have been satirical with a biting wit. The most famous of the latter variety is that by Arthur Hugh Clough, a Victorian poet. Clough is best known for his poem 'Say not the struggle naught availeth' a short poem in which he exhorts us not to give up even when things look grim. It begins with the verse

*Say not the struggle nought availeth,
The labour and the wounds are vain,
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,
And as things have been they remain.*

And ends with

*And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light,
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly,
But westward, look, the land is bright.*

Tennyson apparently referred to Clough as 'Goodman Dull'. Whether that was a judgement on his poetry or character is not clear. In his version of the Ten Commandments 'The Latest Decalogue' Clough makes his view of Victorian society, its hypocrisy, materialism and self interest very clear. Some commentators say it reflects not only his view of his own age but his view of humanity in general. Perhaps the poem's best known lines are:

*Thou shalt not kill; but need'st not strive
Officiously to keep alive:*

There are two versions of 'The Latest Decalogue' one is held at Harvard University and the other in the British library. The version given below is a combination of the two.

- 1 Thou shalt have one God only; who
 Would tax himself to worship two?
- 2 God's image nowhere shalt thou see,
 Save haply in the currency:
- 3 Swear not at all; since for thy curse
 thine enemy is not the worse:
- 4 At church on Sunday to attend
 Will serve to keep the world thy friend:
- 5 Honour thy parents; that is, all
 From whom advancement may befall:
- 6 Thou shalt not kill; but need'st not strive
 Officiously to keep alive:
- 7 Do not adultery commit;
 Advantage rarely comes of it:

- 8 Thou shalt not steal; an empty feat,
When it's so lucrative to cheat:
- 9 Bear not false witness; let the lie
Have time on its own wings to fly:
- 10 Thou shalt not covet; but tradition
Approves all forms of competition.

Probably Clough's view of his own age, and the rules they live by, is not so out of date, after almost 160 years, as one might have expected - with perhaps the exception of his take on the fourth commandment.

Alan Redhouse

~ Minutes of Church Meeting held on Sunday 15th of November at 11.15am (Zoom Meeting)

1. **Present:** Andy H (mins), Brenda M, David G, Margaret G (chair), Nicola H, Lorna R, Leonie E, Geoff W, Carole W, Enid W, Alan R, Margaret R, Margaret E, Gwen M, Steve R, Gwyneth HR

Apologies: Michael W.

2. **Approval of Minutes of previous meeting**, matters arising not on the agenda (none). Date of next meeting: pencilled in for 13th December, but may well not be needed.
3. **Notification of AOB:** update on site development possibilities.
4. **Worship Group update** including Advent and Christmas plans. There will be a 'Not the Carol Service on the Sunday before Christmas, with participation from various people especially young. On Christmas Day, there will be an ongoing gathering at 10.00, more of a drop in and an opportunity for good wishes. Gwen is leading the service on 27th December.

Communion has become less of a fixed point in the month, this feels like a way to continue, as long as people have notice of when communion is happening. There was a discussion of how we retain the symbolism of fellowship – with the leaders of worship taking responsibility for how to do it, and encouraged to try different ways of doing this. Some people have found something awkward about eating and drinking in separate homes; others seeing a link beyond our own community.

Action: Keep experimenting, and revisit in several months. Possible recording of some services, or parts of, to broadcast what we are doing. This could be done through a link sent out to others on request, or a recording without copyright elements.

5. Church weekend 2021 update: 2020 would have been at Thornleigh. June 2021 Rydal. June 2022 Thornleigh. After some discussion, proceeding with this timetable seemed preferable and possible, compared to the alternatives of smaller bookings in eg. Send possible, given the news of the vaccine and the prospective roll out compared to the alternatives of smaller bookings in e.g. September. Agreed that we will, irrespective, have some event in June (on Zoom if needed).

6. Fabric news: radiator valves are almost replaced. Cellar windows have been replaced. Ceiling has been patched. Gutters are being fixed. Gardening is going on. Trees are starting to grow on Linton House site.

Foodbank is continuing, other events have stopped during the lockdown, but some will start again in December. Financially, giving is continuing, some users are still contributing, heating costs are substantially down, cleaning and caretaking continue. David and Margaret go about once a week. Another hybrid service likely soon – those who were present (Beryl, Monica, Rose) would all come again, having valued the opportunity.

7. AOB: Deacons are meeting GM Commoners this week to re-engage – very exploratory at this point. A shared housing project.

Meeting closed at 12.17pm.


At this point material for the magazine ran out!

If you would like to comment on any of the articles in this magazine and so start a discussion or if you would care to write an article for us on a topic of your choosing such contributions would be welcome. Please send them by email to alan.redhouse@virgin.net or by post to The Editor, Christward, Union Chapel Fallowfield, 2b Wellington Road, Fallowfield, Manchester, M14 6EQ.

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