

I noticed the Wilson Carlisle College of Evangelism in Sheffield  
is running a course  
Dr Who and Christian Spirituality.  
'Why is Dr Who so popular?  
What is it saying to our culture?  
How does it connect with Christian Spirituality?'

Now normally I would advise you only to visit  
the Wilson Carlisle College of Evangelism  
if you were wearing body armour  
and left your car engine running outside  
ready for a quick get-away.  
But good on them for running the Dr Who course,  
because there is something about the series  
which is messianic  
and captures the public imagination,  
over and above the female audience  
getting the hots for David Tennant!

In a recent episode, the Family of Blood,  
Dr Who lays aside his being a Time Lord  
and becomes utterly mortal,  
John Smith, a teacher at an Edwardian Public School  
in the run up to the Great War.  
He imagines himself marrying matron,  
(which public school boy doesn't)  
with bells pealing at their happy wedding  
with life happily ever after in a thatched cottage  
surrounded by contented offspring.  
Life fast forwards  
and we see Dr Who on his deathbed,  
wrapped in a duck-down coverlet,  
cradled by his adoring wife.

'Are they all safe?' he asks  
'The children, the grandchildren, is everyone safe?'  
'Yes, John, they're all safe,'  
matron replies as he closes his eyes and dies.

Incredibly moving.  
And when you look at a life,  
actual or imaginary,  
when you look at any life as a film  
it always is intensely moving.  
Our problem is that we get stuck with  
snapshots and freeze-frames  
which drag us down,  
whereas we should stop pressing the pause button,  
and let the film run,  
and see how glorious it is.  
The film of every life is glorious,  
massive, immense,  
Hollywood blockbusters  
don't even hold a candle to it.  
No life is immune from sorrow, no life is devoid of joy:  
it would be a very sugary film without sorrow,  
it would be a very depressing film without joy.  
When you let the film run,  
you see both in every life.

Dr Who imagining life with matron  
isn't the first time  
that trick has been pulled.  
Niky Kazantzakis  
in his book,  
the Last Temptation of Christ,  
later made into a film,

has Christ dying on the cross,  
fantasising about the life he could have led  
if he had kept quiet.  
He marries the lovely Mary Magdalene,  
and runs a profitable carpenter's shop,  
with adoring children,  
their children playing around his feet  
with the wooden toys he has carved for them.

The Victorian New Testament Scholar,  
Ernst Renan  
in his Life of Christ  
has the dying Jesus  
regretting his exalted nature.  
'Did he weep that he had not remained  
the simple carpenter of Nazareth.  
Did he remember the clear brooks of Galilee  
at which he might have slaked his thirst,  
the vine and the fig tree beneath which he might have rested,  
the adoring maidens who would perhaps  
have been willing to love him?'

All fanciful stuff,  
and yet the best films  
have more than a bit of fancy in them,  
harness the imagination.  
My two books  
A Vicar's Diary and A Summer's Diary  
ostensibly are about a young parish priest  
enjoying a tiny group of villages  
buried in the Vale of York,  
set in the 1960s: Sacred Heart-Beat.

The reality  
was far from the jolly picture in the novels.  
I lived there as a boy  
and drank in all the wonders of the far-away countryside.  
My father, who was vicar there, was very frustrated.  
We lived in a village of less than a hundred souls,  
and even if they reached the then national average  
of 4% of the population attending church  
on any one Sunday,  
we'd never have more than four in the congregation,  
and it was a very quirky four at that.

My parents were very urban,  
they deeply wanted any church they were involved in to thrive,  
so the only solution was to get out, leave.  
So they were looking for an exit strategy from month one.  
Whereas I wanted to stay there for ever.

Writing the books allowed me to revisit,  
and re-ran our life's film as it were,  
and scripted it as it should have been  
and could have been  
and deserved to have been.  
I wonder sometimes  
whether heaven will be a running, a re-running and re-running manifold  
of our life's film,  
and a re-writing of the script  
as places are revisited  
and wounds are healed.  
That would be a lovely heaven,  
those pitches we've queered,  
those people we've loved and lost  
not queered or lost for ever.

The film of Christ's life  
is the greatest story ever told.  
In one sense the story  
is a distinct thirty three year span  
set in the troubled Middle East  
2000 years ago.  
It is a dynamic story,  
a story on the move from day one,  
journeying to Bethlehem,  
flights to Egypt,  
Christ is always travelling,  
happening on places,  
surprised by people,  
encountering their need.  
'Master, my only daughter is dying,  
come and heal her.'  
'Jesus, Master, have mercy on me,  
let me have my sight back.'  
'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth,  
have you been sent to destroy us.'  
He's always out and about,  
mostly in the countryside,  
management-by-walking-on-the-shop-floor,  
the factory floor,  
is the modern term  
incarnation by walking on earth's floor.

As I say,  
most of the walking about is in the countryside.  
Things turn nasty when his itinerant ministry goes urban,  
and one aspect of his being crucified  
is almost an attempt to nail him down,  
stop him wandering about  
causing such trouble, such wonderful trouble.

But the crucifixion  
trying to nail him down  
only makes matters worse,  
much, much worse.  
Prior to the crucifixion  
it was only Israel he wandered around in,  
no bigger than Yorkshire.  
Post-Easter he wanders around the whole world,  
popping up everywhere  
with his wonderful disturbances.

As I say, in one sense  
the film of Christ's life  
has a tight time-span,  
running from 0 - 33 AD.  
Full-stop.  
But in another sense  
the film starts at the very dawn of creation  
and is still running now.  
And this morning's Gospel  
the Transfiguration  
reflects that aspect,  
an integration  
of past, present and future.  
Moses and Elijah,  
the Law and the Prophets,  
buzz words for a millennium of history  
these big daddies of the Jewish Faith,  
are there chatting with Jesus  
as seeming equals.  
The disciples,  
muddled and fuddled  
represent the future,  
his life that they will take to the very ends of the earth.

The hill where the transfiguration takes place  
signals every hill where God happens,  
from Sinai to Carmel to Calvary to the Ascension.  
And the bright light  
the shining cloud  
is a venerable symbol of God's approval,  
God wrapping himself around you,  
enveloping you  
like warm clouds of steam in the bathroom.  
'This is my beloved Son,  
listen to him'  
is the punchline,  
as Author's Message! Author's Message!  
flashes on the screen.

Terrible things lie ahead,  
the journeying to Jerusalem,  
the murderous arguments,  
the arrest,  
the trial,  
the beatings,  
the mockings,  
the crucifying,  
literally the via dolorosa maxima,  
the way of such terrible grief  
The Transfiguration  
is almost God's way  
of saying  
'Look, what's going to happen is going to happen,  
but actually this is the point of his film  
and every film,  
bright lights instead of utter darkness,  
warm acceptance rather than soul destroying rejection,  
community and discourse

rather than isolation and despair.

This is the point of the story,  
this is the point of every story.  
I am God,  
the producer,  
the director,  
I am in every film star,  
major and minor,  
this is what it is all about,  
where it begins and ends,  
no negotiation,  
no deviation, hesitation or reservation.  
This is it.  
So don't worry.  
Don't worry about the Jerusalems,  
don't worry about the Gethsemanes,  
don't worry about the Calvaries.  
Let the film run.  
I am in control  
and Transfiguration  
is its point and purpose and destination.  
Glimpse it now, on this feast of Quinquagesima,  
the Sunday next before Lent  
and be comforted  
and empowered.'  
And we reply,  
'Are they all safe,  
the children, the grandchildren,  
is everybody safe?'  
And God replies,  
'Everybody's safe.  
You're all safe with me.'