

Christmas Carol Service 2017: A Better Story

I came across a debate on Twitter a few days ago as to whether Die Hard 2 was a Christmas movie! Now in its defence, there is plenty of snow around on screen, it does take place at Christmas and there is a happy ending. In between of course there is a huge amount of violence and death and plenty of swearing which does weaken its case somewhat!

But it got me thinking about what ingredients we need for a good Christmas story. You may have more, but I came up with four themes which appear time and time again in all the greatest Christmas stories.

Firstly, family is important. There needs to be a sense of togetherness and love, at least at the end of the film, which leaves us with a warm glow inside.

Secondly, as the story progresses fears have to be overcome leaving us with a sense of peace at the closing credits.

Thirdly, mistakes of the past have to be left behind; lessons have to be learned. So, in most Christmas stories there is a moral element which leaves us feeling better about ourselves.

And fourthly dreams have to come true.

And of course, these ideals are not just in the Christmas movies. For a number of years we've been bombarded by advertising campaigns in the form of such stories, and the same is true this year.

Debenhams offers us a happy ending with its retelling of the Cinderella story and tells us that "*you shall find your fairytale!*" If you haven't seen it, a man and a woman have a chance encounter, but just as he is about to learn her name the train stops and she has to get off leaving him heartbroken. But, just like in the fairy tale, she leaves her shoe behind.

But he is determined to find her again, and so Facebook and Twitter and even the traditional media are caught up in a storm of publicity to bring the two back together again. But it is fate that lends a hand when they, by chance, find themselves walking down a dimly lit street and bump into each other. They embrace, they kiss, and the music starts because they have found their fairy-tale ending!

The Marks & Spencer's campaign gives us hope of a fresh start doesn't it. It begins with Paddington Bear lying in bed calling out to Santa Claus for a jar of marmalade when he hears a noise on the roof. Opening his window, he sees a man dressed in red carrying a large sack full of labelled presents.

Jumping to entirely the wrong conclusion, for the man is a thief, Paddington leads the man back to all the houses he has just robbed where he forces him to replace all the stolen presents back under their proper trees. And after a typical Hollywood finish with sleighs and falling from roof tops, Paddington gives the Santa-thief a marmalade sandwich before they hug and the Santa-thief walks off a changed man!

If we are looking for light in our darkness and an end to fear, then we need to look no further than the John Lewis advert. I'm sure you will all have seen the story of Moz the Monster, with the little boy who can't sleep because he thinks there is a monster under his bed.

But of course, in the John Lewis fantasy world, when you confront your fear and make a friend with it, then it ceases to be something of which you need to be afraid. And anyway, if you are still afraid of the dark, it seems that those star projectors featured in the ad, and which are available from all good John Lewis stores, will make sure your little one sleeps soundly at night.

And the fourth ingredient, the importance of family, is front and centre in the BBC's new advert. It tells the story of a young girl desperate to take part in the Christmas talent contest. She shares her enthusiasm with her dad, but he is far too busy with work to give her the attention she craves.

The girl feels unloved and unimportant, so when she takes the stage at the talent contest, she feels terribly alone and overcome with stage fright. Until her dad, who has learned his lesson, sees her plight, comes out from the shadows and stands at the back doing the dance with her. The embrace at the end is meant to tell us that family is more important than work, that time with children is precious and that Christmas is the perfect time to put things back in the right perspective.

The importance of family, fears overcome, a fresh start and fairy-tales coming true, that's the stuff of Christmas stories. And when we hear stories like that, something resonates with us because deep down we all share those kinds of longings. We all recognise that in the busyness of life we get our priorities wrong and that family is key. We all have things of which we are afraid and we do our best to cover up those fears. We all have skeletons in the closet, things in our past that haunt us and we long for them to be dealt with once and for all. And don't we all long for a happy ending? Don't we long for a world where no one is lonely, where there is peace between nations, where the oceans aren't full of plastic, where everyone has enough to eat, where children are safe, where lives are no longer blighted by sickness or disease or death. And of course, the advertisers know that, and they are spinning us a tale to warm our hearts and open our wallets!

But whilst they may have diagnosed the human condition well enough the solutions they offer are not good enough. They don't go deep enough and they don't last long enough. Like the spare wheels that are being fitted in more and more cars these days, they are designed to get us from where we break down to a garage, but nothing more.

What we need is a better story; one that is brutally honest about the problems we face as broken, hurting people living in a broken and hurting world, and one that is able to offer us real and lasting solutions that don't fade when the Christmas decorations are packed away. What we need is certain hope and real forgiveness and lasting peace and an eternal family. And where do we find those things? We find them all in the child of Mary, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laying in a manger.

You see family is vitally important, both for our own health and flourishing and for the good of our society. We were made for relationships and friendship and marriage are built into God's good design for creation. But at times of celebration, like Christmas, it's easy to see the brokenness in our own families and the damage done to children and adults when marriages fall apart.

You see however much we love our children, the truth is that there are no perfect human fathers just as there are no perfect human mothers. The BBC advert gets that bit right. All our families are broken and bruised in some ways; none of our families fit the Disney mould. And even when lessons are learned, so often we make the same mistakes again and again from generation to generation to generation.

But the child in the manger invites us into his perfect family. For all eternity the triune God of the Bible, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, what we might call the Divine Family, has existed as in a relationship of perfect love. And it was out of this great love that Jesus came to earth to bring us back to the Father we all need and into the family where we all belong. What's more, as we are drawn into his family and grow into his family likeness then we are to be transformed into the kinds of parents and children we long to be. That's the Christmas story: that's the better story.

When it comes to dealing with our fears we need a better story too don't we. Whether it's a fear of the dark, like in the John Lewis advert, or fear of loneliness, or losing your job, or losing your children, or illness or death, fear is part of the human condition. We try and deal with our fears by turning on the lights; we try and cover up our fears with a smile; we try to run away from our fears through drink or drugs or working longer hours or whatever, but the fears remain.

But the child in the manger is also the Prince of Peace and the Light of the World. A friendship with Jesus means walking day by day with the one who made the stars and the planets, who holds creation in its place, who gives us life and who conquered death. And if our hand is in his hand; if we can trust him with our life and our death, then what is there to fear? When God promises that all things work together for the good of those who love him, what is there to fear? When our end is guaranteed, when our future is glorious, what is there to fear in this life? That was the song of the angels, "peace on earth to those on whom his favour rests". And that's the Christmas story: that's the better story.

But if the Christmas story deals with our present fears and longings, it also deals with our past failures.

One of the things for which 2017 will be remembered is the #metoo campaign, where hundreds if not thousands of ordinary as well as famous women and men acknowledged that they had been subject to unwanted inappropriate and sometimes horrendous sexual advances. For many politicians and celebrities 2017 was a year when the past came very much into the present. What we do about that? How do we deal with our past failings?

Some in the media spotlight have resigned. Others will face criminal charges. That's the way that sins against society are rightly dealt with. But how do we deal with those feelings of guilt ourselves? It's good to undo the wrong things you've done - and the Paddington advert is a good example of that. But surely that isn't enough. The guilt remains, our bent towards sin and rebellion remains. Our hearts are not what they should be and we are not what we should be. And if we are to come into God's eternal family and enjoy the peace that he offers then our failings need to be dealt with once and for all.

And once again, the Christmas story is right on the money. For the child in the manger grows up to be the Saviour on the cross. Having lived the perfect life we can never live, Jesus himself dies the death that we deserve so that our past, our sins and failings against people and against God, can be dealt with once and for all. If you want real freedom from your past, then look to the child in the manger because that's the Christmas story: that's the better story.

And if you are looking for a happy ending, then don't look to the Debenhams fairy-tale. Interestingly, the advert ends with the words: "*and as for happily ever after... Well, who knows?*" The words on the screen may declare "*you shall!*" but the hope Debenhams offer is "*who knows!*"

But there is no doubt about the happy ending for those whose hope and trust is in the child in the manger. For the Christian the promises of Scripture are certain and sure.

Speaking of fulfilling our deepest longings Jesus said this: "*I am the bread of life. He who comes to me **will** never go hungry, and he who believes in me **will** never be thirsty.*" John 6:35. Talking about a real new start the Bible teaches that "*If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just & **will** forgive us our sins and cleanse us from **all** and righteousness.*" 1 John 1:9. And what better happy ending is there than the one Jesus speaks of in John 3: 16? "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that **whoever** believes in him, **will** not perish but **will** have eternal life.*"

The Hollywood, Disney, BBC, retail wonderland Christmas stories may warm our hearts and offer so much, but they all fail to deliver. They diagnose our condition but their solutions are too weak, too shallow and

too temporary for our aching hearts. But the child in the manger gives solemn promises which he guarantees to deliver in part right now, but entirely and eternally when he returns as King and judge. That is the Christmas story: that's the better story.

And the greatest thing about this story is that it isn't a fairy-tale, but true! Jesus really was born some 2000 years ago, in the real town of Bethlehem, to a real mother called Mary. At the age of 30 Jesus began an historically well-documented public ministry which lasted around 3 ½ years. At the end of that time Jesus died a real death, was buried in a real tomb, and 3 days later had a real physical resurrection which transformed his followers who went out with the good news and transformed the world.

So, this Christmas I want to invite you to consider this better story. We are going to offer you a tract on your way out of church; do please take one and make the time to read it. It'll take you about as long as an advert break on TV and will give you a much better story.

What's more, you already have an invitation to some events we are running in February. Come along. If this story is true, which is what the Bible claims, then there is nothing as important as discovering that glorious and life changing truth for yourself.

And if you can't wait that long, then why not make tonight the night you ask Jesus to be your Saviour and your Lord. If that's you, I or others in the church here would love to chat and pray with you afterwards.

Enjoy Christmas. Enjoy the stories. But remember the better story, best story, the Christmas story, the Jesus story – for it alone is the true story.