



## THE NATIVITY

**Reel Issues authors:** Lindsay Shaw and Simon Carver

**Overview:** A BBC television retelling of Jesus' birth aimed at a mainstream audience and transmitted in four half-hour during the week leading up to Christmas 2010

**Screenplay:** Tony Jordan **Director:** Coky Giedroyc  
**Production:** Red Planet for BBCTV (2010)

**Length:** Two hours

**Cautions:** None

### THE SERIES

As lead writer for *Eastenders*, Tony Jordan wrote hundreds of episodes and gave us characters like Kat Slater and Alfie Moon. As creator of *Life on Mars* he transported us to a world of politically incorrect 1970s coppers and in *Hustle* he gave us a ringside seat to the lavish schemes of some stylish con-men.

In *The Nativity* he brings his trademark humour and humanity to a faithful telling of the biblical Nativity narratives. He has said that the biggest challenge was to find a fresh way in to tell a story that has been told a million times before – and to make it believable to people. For example, when Mary tells her fiancée 'I'm pregnant but it's God's', he says he wanted to show Joseph's behaviour in a way that would make down-to-earth viewers say 'OK, I sort of buy that'.

His approach was partly character driven: 'I didn't know who Mary was as a character or who Joseph is. Understanding them was my starting point on how to tell this story and be truthful to the Gospel.' At the end of his researching, writing and wrestling with the narrative, Jordan says he has emerged with a much deeper and stronger faith himself.

Beginning with Mary's parents' search for a suitable husband for their daughter, the series paints in details about Jesus' family. It is unusual as a mainstream drama in stressing the devoutness both of Mary's family and especially of Mary herself. Additional angles on the story come from the Magi – shown as a school of Persian astronomer-academics – and from Thomas, an impoverished shepherd who worries for his pregnant wife and his inability to pay Rome's taxes. However, we fear for her and her child's survival and for Thomas' own as the school of hard knocks drives him ever closer towards desperate actions against the Roman occupiers.

### PRACTICALITIES

Since the series is screened in four episodes, you might want to watch them in company with a group of friends and discuss the programmes as you go. Or chat about them later in the evening at the pub or with friends at work the next day. To help you, we have broken the questions down, episode by episode, avoiding plot spoilers and enabling you to discuss *The Nativity* an episode at a time.

## EPISODE 1

*Mary's parents Joachim (Neil Dudgeon) and Anna (Claudie Blakley) make marriage plans for their daughter (Tatian Maslany). Like many protective parents, they are not bowled over with the options – Joseph (Andrew Buchan) isn't anything special in Mary's mother's mind 'But at least he has teeth', while Joseph's house-building skills don't do much to impress his future father-in-law. But love blossoms and couple are soon engaged to be married in a year's time ...*

### Discussion starters

- Screenwriter Tony Jordan says he didn't know enough about who Mary and Joseph were. Do your group think the same? What were their ideas of Mary and Joseph before they watched the programme? Where do these ideas come from?
- What did you think of how they are shown in this first episode? How would you characterise Mary's family, Mary herself and her relationship with Joseph? Did these ring true to how you think they are portrayed in the Bible?
- After some of the other contenders, Mary must have been relieved when her parents started to consider Joseph as a husband! What are/were your own experiences of bringing home boyfriends/girlfriends to your parents or your experiences as parents with your own children's romantic interests?
- Although theirs is an arranged marriage, Mary and Joseph's relationship is told very much as a love story. What does this add to the series?
- Lying in a cornfield looking at the evening sky Mary asks 'Do you think God can see us?' What do you think of when you look up at the sky, or at the stars at night?
- From the stars, we cut to special effects showing an alignment of three planets 'as one star'. What do you think this adds to the programme and what do you make of the star-gazing wise men it introduces us to? 'Gatherers of knowledge who can't see the nose on their own faces', is how Balthasar (Peter Capaldi) describes his sceptical colleagues. Is there a danger that knowledge (scientific or other) should close our minds to things we don't yet know?
- What does the story of impoverished shepherd Thomas and his family add to the episode?

### Digging deeper

In the New Testament the reality is that Joseph is almost a blank canvas, who says nothing and disappears from the scene from the point of the Jerusalem visit in **Luke 2:41–52**. Matthew speaks well of his character and actions (**Matthew 1.18–25**) but Luke has more to say about him when Jesus is dedicated in the Temple (**Luke 2.22–35**) than in his account of the birth (**Luke 2.1–7**). How do these passages add to your impressions of Joseph?

Mary's story is told more fully in Luke (**Luke 1.26–56**) and her character is hinted at later in her interaction with the adult Jesus (**John 2.5**) and the early Church (**Acts 1.14**). What do you make of her?

Does this fit with the woman in the drama who says 'in synagogue you feel safe as though God is cradling you in his arms'? Here, while Mary is shown as an ordinary, young girl, the episodes stresses how devout she is – visiting the synagogue daily. Her family, too, seem devout and there are clues to this in the Gospels, eg the family's annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem (**Luke 2.41–52**) and the devotion of her cousin Elizabeth and Zechariah (**Luke 1.5–25 especially 1.5–6, Luke 1.39–45, 1.67–79**).

## EPISODE 2

*Mary's marriage plans are put in jeopardy when the angel Gabriel (John Lynch) brings Mary astonishing news. Mary tries to tell Joseph but the news isn't easy to share ...*

### Discussion starters

- What did you think about the film's presentation of Mary's reaction to the angel's news? What is her response? How would you have responded? How does Gabriel respond?
- When have you felt similarly over a challenge you faced or something you felt God was calling you to? Was there a 'Gabriel' to give you reassurance?
- Mary goes to visit Elizabeth – her test to see if the dream in which Gabriel spoke to her and told that Elizabeth herself was pregnant is true. Have you ever tested some direction you think God has given you in this kind of way? What happened?
- A central theme in the series is the isolation and shame Mary will experience in bearing the Son of God. She is on her own. Only Elizabeth and Zechariah can share with her in it. Can you imagine how this would feel? When Mary returns after her long stay with Elizabeth, unsuspecting Joseph discovers the truth (or part of it). How does the series make us feel the full force of his shock?
- The wise men appear as distant observers on the story and seem quite effective in unscrambling its meaning. As the wise men make camp on their journey, Melchior (Jack Shepherd) reminds Balthasar of Hebrew Scriptures that tell how God has intervened in Israel's past. Balthasar says that the gods no longer intervene, but Melchior pushes him further: what if God were like a father who lets his people go their own way. 'But what if the father saw the children were

lost. The father would intervene.' What do you think of Balthasar's line of argument? Does it help to explain why experiences of miracles and dramatic intervention by God seem more the exception than the rule?

### Digging deeper

**Read Matthew 1.18–21.** The Nativity suggests that Joseph's hurt wasn't as quickly healed as Matthew suggests. What do you think about this disparity? Matthew tells us that 'Joseph took Mary home as his wife', but do you think he necessarily did so with good grace? Or should we see the sparse account in Matthew as implying that Joseph grasped and acted on God's bigger picture?

- How easy do you find it to put aside your own feelings and hurts to act in ways that are for the good of others?
- Has your own obedience to God led you to experience pain or hurt from others? What has strengthened you at these times?

Zechariah quotes **Isaiah 7.14** saying, 'The virgin shall bear a son' and tells Mary 'You carry the Messiah'. 'But I am a nobody' Mary replies. What does it mean to us that God doesn't see us as nobodies? Read the passage which Christians historically call the 'Magnificat', Mary's response to God in **Luke 2.46–55**.

- Note the things which she says God has done for her. What promises and encouragements do the group find in this passage? What does it mean for us if God accepts, dignifies and honours the poor, the ordinary and powerless people in the world?
- While western culture and TV shows like *The Apprentice* and *X Factor* challenge people to find significance in career, fame and success, do biblical passages like this offer another route to significance? What other passages can inspire and mentor us in this?

### EPISODE 3

*A furious Joseph believes thinks the woman he loved has made a fool of him and rejects Mary's explanations. As word of Mary's pregnancy travels, Mary's father fears for her life and begs Joseph to take Mary with him to Bethlehem.*

#### Discussion starters

- How did you feel about Joseph's shocked and horrified reaction? How does this compare with the way you have thought about the story before?

Even Mary's heartbroken parents cannot believe her story, but go on caring. Have you ever had to care for someone even while doubting their story?

- Herod – dissolute, paranoid and fearful of both Caesar and the caravan of foreigners seen in the desert – wants them murdered. Meanwhile Thomas the shepherd tires of his rabbi's attempts to console him with promises of the Messiah ... How can we avoid anger or despair when the things we hope for don't seem to arrive?
- Mary's humiliation continues as the mob in the marketplace turn violent. Her father tells Joseph that the mob would have Mary stoned for becoming pregnant outside marriage. This intense intolerance perhaps brings to mind the stigma of single motherhood in this country generations ago, or the threat to life faced by unmarried mothers in other parts of the world today. How does this make you feel? What can be done about it? How should we respond to women who do become pregnant outside any committed relationship? And what about the men?
- What did you notice about Joseph's dream and how this corresponds to Mary's dream? How easily does faith come to members of the group? And what

helps – is it practice, evidence, studying the Bible, prayer, the experience of others, or something else?

#### Digging deeper

**Isaiah 7. 10–14; 9.2–7; Zechariah 9.9–17** What help would Isaiah's and Zechariah's prophecies of Jesus have been to someone like Thomas who was waiting for the Messiah? And why, according to Herod's emissary to the wise men, were they seen as such a threat by Herod?

Although Jesus came as a servant King and a suffering Messiah, fulfilling neglected prophecies in **Isaiah 52.13–53.12**, Christians are still viewed by some governments as a threat. Why do you think this is? Are there ways in which active faith in Jesus may be a challenge to the powers that be?

## EPISODE 4

*Joseph and Mary face rejection in Bethlehem. As Mary goes into labour, Joseph becomes increasingly desperate. While relatives are far from the scene of the birth, a gaggle of unwashed shepherds and an exotic group of foreigners arrive having believed the signs.*

### Discussion starters

- In the previous episode Mary told Joseph 'My defender in your dream, his name was called Gabriel, and he told you I was carrying the Messiah', but Joseph didn't acknowledge that Mary has told him the truth. He continues to question, saying 'I wish I had enough faith to believe you.' Do you attribute Joseph's reluctance to his feelings of hurt and betrayal or to inability to believe in the impossible?
- When Joseph arrives at his cousin's in Bethlehem, welcome turns to rejection because of Mary's baby. How do you feel about the hypocrisy here – the father could be accepted, the mother is depised?
- Joseph's attempts to find help as Mary goes into labour fall on deaf ears until a worldly wise woman who has probably helped many girls in similar circumstances agrees. Why do you think Tony Jordan creates this character to help Mary?
- Thomas the shepherd has attacked a Roman soldier because of their previous treatment of him, but was unable to kill him. Later his wife tells her bruised and dejected husband, 'One man cannot change the world.' Does this statement have any echoes for you when you see it in the context of the baby Mary is carrying? What could it say about the difference between Thomas' actions and those Jesus will take?
- Hearing news that the Messiah Israel has been waiting for is born, Thomas asks, 'Is it true?' What do you think this implies? Is it years of waiting

for a deliverer? Or is it a universal question Tony Jordan wants views to ask themselves?

- Thomas' father appears for the first time in this episode remembering his own days as an angry young man. 'I too had to choose between God and the sword,' he says. How might this prepare Thomas for the type of Messiah Jesus actually became, rather than the warrior deliverer who to drive out Israel's oppressors that many expected?
- How did you feel about the special effects sequence showing the alignment of planets behind the star of Bethlehem? What does this add to the story?
- It is only when Joseph grasps Mary's hand as she is in labour that he truly believes her and accepts that the child is God's Son. The drama suggests that he experiences the same sense of God's love that Mary felt when Gabriel appeared to her. How do you react to this? Have you ever experienced God in a way like this, or has it been in more everyday ways that you have learnt to trust him?
- Balthasar seems to stand in for the apostle John when he says 'The Word is made flesh because the lamb of God is here and takes away the sin of the world', compare John 1.14, 29; 1 John 2.2. Unlikely though it is that Balthasar would have spoken like this, how might these words make sense of the astonishing story that has just played out before us?

### Digging deeper

In *The Nativity* Mary's rejection is the reason for her needing to give birth in a stable. Usually accounts explain it by saying the Roman census had filled all the town's conventional accommodation. But it is interesting that there is nowhere in Luke's narrative that directly links this to the census.

**Matthew 26.52; Luke 22.36–37** For four centuries the early Christians refused to fight in the Roman army. Should Christians today be pacifists? Or do these apparently contradictory statements suggest there is a time for fighting?

**Psalms 51.10; Matthew 5.8; Hebrews 10.22** What has separated Mary from many of the other characters in the story? A voiceover at the end of the episode says, 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God'. Is this the answer and, if so, how do we become 'pure in heart'?

We tend to imagine that Jesus 'learned his faith' from his father (**Luke 2:41–52**), but is it possible that he learned something from his mother – certainly when we see Tony Jordan's devout Mary?

### **Response**

Light in various forms – in the celestial star, in Mary's and Joseph's experience of 'bathing' in God's love, and in Jesus the promised 'light of the world' – features strongly throughout this series. If appropriate, in a moment of quiet, pass a lighted candle slowly around the group, inviting each member to hold it briefly as an expression of their willingness to receive Jesus, 'the light of the world'. Perhaps read John 1.1–18 as the candle circulates.

*Lindsay Shaw is Reel Issues editor and Bible Society Creative Resources Officer.*

*Simon Carver is Senior Minister of Dagnall Street Baptist Church, St Albans and film critic on Premier Radio.*

*© Bible Society 2010. Permission is given to make up to ten copies for use within a single Reel Issues discussion group.*