

FEBRUARY 2005

The sea! The sea!

SINCE CHRISTMAS our news has been dominated by the tragic effects of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean. People have been asking ‘Where was God in the disaster?’ a very natural response. The Ancient Jewish writers saw the sea as evil, a place of chaos, flooding and destroying the world and the source of great monsters. The Book of Genesis suggests that God had to overcome the primal waters to create the world in the first place.

The Bible sees evil as a terrible reality – whether natural or human. It does not try to minimise it or explain it away — but to give an account of God’s plan to put the world to rights through the family of Israel who are brought *through* the sea to the land of promise and then through a messianic figure. At times of national distress

Bible writers often compared the experience to going through and even being overcome by deep waters and they pleaded with God to save them.

The early Christian writers saw Jesus as the person who had come to save them. He was not just a teacher, or a moral example to others. He was someone who on the cross went down into the depths of the dark forces of the world — overwhelmed by the the chaos and evil of the world the victim of the policies of Herod and Pilate, the blinkeredness of the religious leaders, the storms on the sea of Galilee.

His death was compared with Jonah’s experience of being thrown into the sea to be swallowed by a monster. Jesus was swallowed by the monster called death and the writers insist that in his

death God took upon himself the full force of the world’s evil but after three days he rose from that death as a sign that evil will eventually be overcome. The disaster of death is not the end.

So where is God in the disaster? God is with all those who enter into the pain and sorrow of those suffering, perhaps with a deep sense of helplessness, as the means by which the world is to be healed. God is with all those who in disaster reach out with acts of love and comfort and support. God knows what it is to be overwhelmed — but through darkness also to rise again and bring hope of new life.

John Clark

Please see inside for special prayers about the tsunami.

Tsunami Prayers

Lord Jesus,
The storm is life and life is the storm
And there is no escaping it;
But what matters is that you are in the storm with us,
A beacon and presence that is sure.
Amen

from Madagascar

Lord-of-the-storm
To all who live beside dangerous seas
And on the banks of unpredictable rivers
Grant peace of mind
And the assurance of your presence
In each and every circumstance that may befall them.
Amen

from Bangladesh

Blessed are all your Saints,
O God and King, who have travelled over the tempestuous sea of
this life and have made the harbour of peace.
Watch over us who are still on a dangerous voyage.
Frail is our vessel, and the ocean is wide; but as in your mercy
you have set our course, so pilot the vessel of our life towards the
everlasting shore of peace, and bring us at the last to the quiet
haven of our heart's desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

St Augustine of Hippo

Jerr-ee, Jerr-ee!

Jonathan Causer

We have not had such a fuss about a work of art since *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. At the Old Bailey trial in 1960 Richard Hoggart described that book as "virtuous, if not puritanical" and raised some eyebrows; would he say the same about *Jerry Springer the Opera*?

The play caused little stir when it was first in the National Theatre but an enormous brouhaha when aired late at night on BBC2, thereby neatly proving one of its points: that TV has become our substitute reality. Much of the noise was made before transmission, by a group called Christian Voice which orchestrated 47,000 complaints; there were another 900 afterwards. As one message on the BBC website read, "It'll be interesting to note how many complaints there are once people have actually seen this programme."

Mark Thompson, Director General of the BBC responded "There is nothing in this which I believe to be blasphemous". Whilst many people clearly disagree, there is room to argue that he is right.

My own view – and I emphasise that this is a personal opinion – is that *Jerry Springer* is not blasphemous: *The Life of Brian* was a lot more offensive. Much of the complaint is because of the format not the content. Just as in *Lady Chatterly*, no-one really minded the adulterous sex, just the

"unprintable" word used to describe it.

Act I was the Jerry Springer freak-show itself; and Act II Jerry's dying dream-sequence after he had been shot. In it, the Devil demands that Jerry stage-manage a contest between Jesus and himself, and into this God Himself descends.

Of course a scene, even the dream of a non-Christian man, in which Jesus appears dressed in a nappy is likely to cause great offence. The simple portrayal of God in art can not be offensive – think of the Sistine Chapel – but the manner may be. An offensive manner is not the same as blasphemy. In fact, in *Jerry Springer* the figure of God is exactly in accordance with Christian understanding: he feels pain at "millions of voices making all the wrong choices" and frustration at people "turning round and blaming it on me." This is a God who can and does feel as humans do. He gives to humans the freedom of choice, knowing that many of them will make the wrong choices.

What are those wrong choices? In Act I we saw the studio audience as a mob of grotesques feeding off the weaknesses and frailties of fellow humans, revelling in abusing them. In that mob we were intended to and did see our own selves; and we are harshly criticised for ignoring and perverting Jesus' command that we love one another. Jerry claims that he merely holds up a mirror to society, but that defence is rejected and in the play Jerry finds himself condemned. The same goes for everyone.

God knows of human weakness and has suffered it Himself: when He came to earth to be born, He did not cease to be fully divine, and when He returned to heaven he did not cease to be fully human. To have Jesus saying that He is "a little bit gay" is no more than to say that He understands all human conditions. At the time of the crucifixion Jesus underwent the most extreme pain and humiliation: He was spat upon, He was scourged. We still follow a crucified Lord, a very different picture to that held by adherents of other faiths: perhaps this is why *Bezhti* caused violence in Birmingham but *Jerry Springer* did not in London. Christians know that their redeemer lives, but also that many others reject Him; that rejection causes us sorrow, not fury.

This play does not reject either Jesus or God. It affirms both their existence and the major tenets of their teaching. Indeed, the introduction points out that anyone ignorant of the Judeo-Christian tradition will find the play hard to understand. The satirical target is *us*, every one of us, for ignoring God's teaching. If we accepted it and acted on it, there would be no Jerry Springer show; and no need for this play.

It is not Christians that ought to object to *Jerry Springer* – it is atheists.

This is an area where strong views are held: we would welcome further contributions, whether on Jerry Springer or more general questions about religion and art.

February



2005

6 th Feb	8.00am	Holy Communion
	10.30am	Worship Together
	6.30pm	Holy Communion
13 th Feb	8.00am	Holy Communion
	10.30am	Holy Communion
	6.30pm	Evening Prayer
20 th Feb	8.00am	Holy Communion
	10.30am	Morning Prayer
	6.30pm	Holy Communion
27 th Feb	8.00am	Holy Communion
	10.30am	Morning Prayer
	6.30pm	Evening Prayer

Lent and Easter

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, 9th February. The Old Testament custom of putting ashes on one's face or clothing was a symbol of repentance or remorse. (e.g. *Esther* 4.1; *Jeremiah* 6.26). When the early Church began to observe Lent as a period of preparation for Easter, repentance and remorse played a key part. The wearing of ashes was adopted as a proper external sign of this inward attitude of remorse or repentance. Lent's forty days (excluding the Sundays) reflect the time which Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness, and Christians are encouraged to fast as well. The custom of pancakes on Shrove Tuesday came from housewives using up their supplies of flour, eggs and milk immediately before Lent. Good Friday is 25th March. Full details of Easter services at St Michael's will be in the next issue of *The Messenger*

WHO'S WHO

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Remembering the mince pies

The church sound system worked poorly on Christmas morning, and we were delighted. The reason is that there was no malfunction, just that there were so many people in church that the press of bodies impeded the radio signals. Plans are now in hand for a replacement sound system.

We were also very happy in the light of the Queen's Christmas message to welcome several Buddhists and at least one Sikh to our service on Christmas Day.

J - I - C # 55 & 56

Using only the digits 1, 3, 4 and 6 exactly once each, and the conventional operators +, -, * and /, make the total 24.

These are anagrams of items of kitchen equipment. They are all hyphenated.

EEEEEDFPRZ
 EEESOOORRURPKC
 EAAIIRMNB
 EEEEEOURZQSNML
 EEIKFSLTH
 EAADSKNTC
 EEUORRDDGRLF
 EAAUSSRTRCG
 EEUITKCCB
 EAUCCRNKRT

Solutions

When pronounced, they do not sound like the sounds they make.

It is white bear, because Harry must start at the North Pole [added value: all polar bears are left-handed]. The bird, however, must be a penguin: Harry starts a short distance from the South Pole, walks Southwards a mile and by walking East for a mile he describes a circle round the pole, then returns to where he started. His starting point is anywhere a distance of $(1 + 1/(2\pi))$ miles from the South Pole. Smarty pants who want to correct for the curvature of the Earth (the polar radius r of which is 3900 miles) made apply $(\text{inv.sin.}(1/\pi*r))*r$, for all the good that it will do them.

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