

Holy Eucharist, Christmas Day, 2022
Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2: 11-14 and Luke 2: 1-14
Mother Emma

What, I wonder, will we all be doing this afternoon, after we have been to church, eaten our food and opened our presents?

A hundred years ago, Christmas evening might have been spent playing parlour games or hymn-singing around the piano, but the chances are that today or at least tomorrow, for almost all of us, either television or streaming will play a considerable part in our Christmas festivities. We have come to expect to view the world through film – we see wars and human tragedies, World Cup matches and our favourite bestsellers unfolding through the television or internet.

Even the events we come to celebrate here today can have a particular power when portrayed through visual media.

I remember sitting with a church Youth Group watching the BBC film of the Nativity from 2010 – a powerful modern interpretation of the story which clearly reveals the fears and prejudices and ultimately the joy and wonder of a teenage Mary and Joseph. At the end, once everything was resolved, when Joseph's fears and doubts had transformed into love and understanding at the birth of the baby Jesus, and both shepherds and kings knelt in worship at the crib, one of our teenagers looked up with sparkling eyes, and said, "That was so cool! Is there a sequel?"

It was, of course, the voice of a generation strongly influenced by Hollywood, and the idea of Pirates of the Caribbean 1, 2, 3, 4 and so on. These teenagers all attended church regularly – they all knew the rest of the story, but for them, it came alive on a wide-screen TV, and left them eager to know more. Clearly the film had succeeded in demonstrating (better than Sunday School!) that there is more to come, and that the final Nativity tableau, like the one we see here in our own Crib Scene in church, is only the beginning of the story, fitting into a much longer narrative in which we still live today.

So what might the sequel – or sequels - be called? Nativity 2 has of course already been taken by a different Hollywood blockbuster. The Chronicles of Jesus part 2, perhaps, or possibly the snappier, but less accessible "Incarnation 2"...? Such titles would relate only to the life of Jesus on earth, and such a series might end with a film similar to Mel Gibson's "The Passion".

But there is so much more to be told – the life of the Christian Church from Pentecost to the present day, the outworking of God's love revealed in the coming of Christ in Bethlehem, our own lives and prayers and hopes and fears held in God's hand even today.

Do we see ourselves as actors in "The Chronicles of Jesus 3 – the Ongoing Story"? And then what about a prequel?

As in series like Star Wars, would a director need to put together a number of prequels, in order to explain the background of how the Christmas story arose? This might need to include the whole of the Old Testament – by far the longest section of the Bible, but which, for Christians, points ahead to the coming of Christ.

Our Old Testament reading this morning from Isaiah foretold the great light which would shine out upon those dwelling in darkness, a child born to us, a son given to us. The story of Jesus also has to be understood in the context of his descent from the family of David the king of Israel, so perhaps David and Isaiah might feature in this prequel, but what of Moses, whose story has

provided the plot of more than one blockbuster film, who first led God's people out of Egypt, as Jesus would come to lead them into new life?

The trouble, some say, with the voracious demand for sequels for every good movie, is that after too many sequels they become forced and lose their spontaneity. But with some, such as the Godfather part 2, or indeed, Toy Story II, it has been suggested that as the story develops through the second part, revealing more about the plot and characters set up by the first film, we are able to gain a much deeper and more sophisticated understanding of what is going on.

For those who are used to watching the Story of Jesus part 1 as a nursery-school play with adorable, tiny children acting out the parts of Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds and kings, the move to the next instalment – to the narrative of Jesus's ministry on earth, and possibly also his Crucifixion, Death and Resurrection – may seem an enormous leap. We jump from a story for young children to one which requires us as adults to enter into the narrative ourselves, and to address some of the hardest questions we wrestle with – about pain and fear and death, but also about love and forgiveness and trust. But it would be sad if we were never to make this leap.

We all enjoy the beauty and poignancy, nostalgia and familiarity of the Christmas story, and we gather here today to remember once again the story of the stable and the Christ child, the shepherds and the angels.

Perhaps we are also called to remember that the Nativity has at least two sequels – one, the life of Jesus, who came down to earth at Christmas to share our lives, to experience with us the joys and sorrows of human existence, so that he can truly share with us in the hopes, fears, pleasures and pain of our lives.

The other is the life of the risen Christ, and that of his Body, God's church on earth, as we, as Christians, seek to follow his teaching and his example, to reach out with his love and his compassion to those around us, and try to reflect something of the glory of God we experience here this Christmas into the world outside.