



Nativity!

Holly Price

Nativity redeemed

Author: Holly Price

Keywords: Christmas, nativity, Jesus, Christianity, belief, celebration, culture, schools, rivalry, ambition

Film title: Nativity!

Director: Debbie Isitt

Screenplay: Debbie Isitt

Starring: Martin Freeman, Ashley Jensen, Jason Watkins, Marc Wootton

Distributor: E1 Entertainment (UK)

Cinema Release Date: 4 December 2009 (UK)

Certificate: U (UK) Contains no material likely to offend or harm

[Image]

Image courtesy E1 Entertainment. © 2009

Teachers lurk anxiously behind tinsel-covered curtains; excited children wait for their big moment; and nervous parents hope that their child won't be the one for whom it's all too much. Delightfully enchanting or toe-curlingly embarrassing, nativity plays are often memorable affairs. More to the point, whether it's a traditional retelling or a politically correct revamping of the story, the power of the original is easily lost.

Nativity! captures the drama, the delight and even the desperation of the nativity play. It is a partially-improvised comedy starring Martin Freeman (*The Office*, *Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy*) that revels in all the ludicrous possibilities of the primary school nativity experience. But it's more

than that: it also reminds us of the biblical truth of the first nativity, and offers a sincere and moving message.

Freeman stars as Paul Maddens, a failed actor turned primary school teacher. His rivalry with Gordon Shakespeare (Jason Watkins), a teacher at a posh local independent school, manifests in their respective nativity shows. Driven to distraction by Gordon's bragging, Paul invents an elaborate lie about Hollywood's interest in turning his nativity show into a book and film. Soon the St. Bernadette's school nativity revolves not around Jesus, but around Paul and his false promise of fame.

In his desire for glory, Paul is quick to point out the faults of others. Only when Paul learns to put his children first can he make room for their dreams and feelings. The irony is that they have already made room for his. With the help of his classroom assistant, Mr Poppy (Marc Wootton), Paul realises that the nativity is not about him or Hollywood. It's about drawing others in; not pushing yourself forward.

[Image]

Image courtesy E1 Entertainment. © 2009

Talking about the film at a recent press screening, Freeman was enthusiastic to be involved in telling such an important story. '*Great things happen to the smallest, tiniest person,*' he said, '*and the least likely people end up being elevated to the highest status.*' So who does *Nativity!* elevate and exalt? Without giving away too much, the ending echoes Jesus's mission in breaking down old hostilities and ushering in the prospect of peace and reconciliation.

Central to this is the messianic fool, Mr Poppy. Far from being the disciplinarian Paul believes they need, Mr. Poppy gets down to the children's own level. His incarnational approach echoes God's willingness to reveal his love for us by becoming one of us. Like Paul, Mr. Poppy has grandiose plans for the nativity production. The difference is, his are centred on the children, not himself. The nativity story brings the whole class together and children who were once considered 'no-hopers' become the stars of the show. Their headmistress confesses, '*Nobody ever expects enough of the children at St. Bernadette's ... All I know is that each and every one of these children*

is amazing and wonderful and a pocket-full of stardust. The gospel is a story of extraordinary hope too. All who accept Jesus – however modest their background – are given the status of a child of God, as well as a unique part to play in his kingdom.

A celebration of selflessness and humility, the film reclaims the wonder inherent in the nativity. The play the children perform revels in the miraculous message of a fragile baby who receives great honour. The Bible reveals that this child is God. Not a God who hoards power like Gordon or looks down on others like Paul, but one who humbles himself like Mr. Poppy. Why? To rescue humanity from our selfishness and to draw us together under his loving rule. Instead of shying away from a Christian Christmas message, *Nativity!* mines it and discovers a love so astounding that it outshines stardom.

[Image]

Related articles/study guides:

- § Nativity! - discussion guide
- § Talking about ... the nativity
- § Culturewatch Podcast (23 November 2009)

Author: Holly Price

© **Copyright:** Holly Price 2009

Opinions expressed in CultureWatch articles are those of the author, and are not necessarily representative of the views of Damaris Trust.

© Damaris Trust, 1997-2004. Click here for information about republishing copyright material.

This article is reproduced from Damaris' Culturewatch website by the kind permission of the Damaris Trust.

[Image]