



Torchwood: Children of Earth

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Making this a war

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Writer: Russell T. Davies, John Fay and James Moran

Director: Euros Lyn

Starring: John Barrowman, Eve Myles, Gareth David-Lloyd, Kai Owen, Peter Capaldi, Nicholas Farrell

Production company: BBC Wales

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DVD classification: 15 Contains moderate bloody violence, violence, threat, distressing scenes and sex references

[Image]

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The Torchwood team have come a long way since their first rather dubious dealings with extraterrestrial invaders back in 2006. Billed as *'more visceral, more violent, and more sexual'* than its parent program, *Doctor Who*, the first series saw the Cardiff-based team encounter, amongst others, a sex-crazed alien and a glove with the power to raise the dead. Despite being entertaining, the show suffered from some hammy acting and poor writing, with its creators apparently overeager to be 'adult' without much consideration for what the term really meant.

Whilst still not having entirely shaken these problems, the second series and recent five-parter *Children of Earth* offer more than enough nail-biting alien action and involving human drama to keep us watching.

Children of Earth sees the team, now sadly depleted by the loss of Tosh and Owen, face its most terrible foe yet. When every single child in the world stops at the same moment, the sinister message that *'we are coming'* heralds the arrival of the monstrous alien species 456. They bring with them the demand that humanity yield ten percent of its children or face destruction. The situation is brought close to home for each character as Jack (John Barrowman) makes contact with his estranged daughter and grandson, Ianto (Gareth Lloyd-Jones) visits his sister and her family, and Gwen (Eve Myles) discovers that she is pregnant. Meanwhile, the callous Prime Minister Green (Nicholas Farrell) defers responsibility for the situation to John Frobisher (Peter Capaldi), a civil servant, who meets with the 456 and attempts the impossible task of negotiating with them. As politicians haggle over which children should be sacrificed, the Torchwood team races against time and the ruthless Agent Johnson (Liz May Brice) to find a means of defeating the 456. It emerges that the entire situation has sprung from questionable actions that Jack took in the past, and he finds himself sacrificing more than he can bear to lose in an attempt to put things right.

The drama of this series centres on the unthinkable ethical dilemma confronting Jack and the world's leaders. Its tensest and most affecting scenes involve no monsters or special effects, but simply a group of people sitting around a table in a briefing room, trying to be 'civilised' as they quantify the worth of a child's life. Nobody in the room can help but show their true colours, whether by the opinions they air or by their silence. The politicians begin to refer to the children as 'units' in an attempt to distance themselves from the reality of what is under discussion, a process which accelerates when practical questions are addressed. How are the ill-fated ten percent to be selected? Once random selection is vetoed (as it carries the risk of one of their own children being chosen), the conversation turns thoroughly chilling. *'Well for a start there are twenty-one children in Oakington right now, twenty-one units, asylum seekers*

awaiting deportation, suggests Frobisher, and the others agree that such children will not be missed. One woman posits that selection should be made on the basis of a child's future contribution to society, with *'the less socially useful'* being culled. Such children will be easily identified. *'If we can't identify the lowest achieving ten percent of this country's children then what are the school league tables for?'*

The writers are not shy about putting their political cards on the table, sometimes effectively, sometimes less so. It is questionable, for instance, whether it was really necessary to so pointedly name the fictional Prime Minister *'Green'*, or to portray him as being entirely heartless and self-interested. It is too easy to villainise those in power for the decisions they have to make, and it would perhaps have been less comfortable but more interesting to see him as a conflicted character, like Frobisher. More compelling are the script's small references to real instances of children's lives being devalued, and the challenges to the viewer that arise from these. Faced with Jack's confident assertion that mankind will stand and fight for its children, the 456 slyly remind him that, *'the human infant mortality rate is 29,158 deaths per day. Every three seconds a child dies. The human response is to accept and adapt'*. This staggering figure is the most frightening and disturbing thing about the series, and our response should be the same as Jack's: *'We're making this a war'*.

The handing over of children in order to pacify the 456 is compared to a *'sacrifice to the ancient gods'*. Whilst not practising child sacrifice as some pagan religions did, many of the cultures surrounding Jesus during his ministry did not afford a great deal of importance to children. Infanticide, for instance, was a common and fully legal method of birth control in pre-Christian Rome. By contrast to this attitude, Jesus rebuked his disciples for treating children as a nuisance, saying, *'Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children'* (Mark 10:14). From a Christian perspective, children are not only to be valued just as much as adults, but considered particularly precious. Even if the lives of 35 million children are logically a beneficial trade-off for the lives of six billion people, the logic is challenged by the knowledge that even the smallest human

life is seen by God and has worth to him: *'You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb'* (Psalm 139:15).

Can it ever be right to sacrifice a few to save many? The Jack of 1965 decides that it is, but his *'sins of the past'* catch up with him in the end. This is a shrewd insight into the outcome of moral compromise, which by its nature cannot neutralise evil, but only suppress it for a time, ultimately feeding it and bringing even costlier consequences in the end. Clem, survivor of Jack's first encounter with the 456, serves as a living reminder of this principle, expressing his horror that Jack will never be vulnerable to consequence in the way that other humans are: *'The man who sent me and my friends to die can't die himself'*. Jack's immortality means that he is forced to watch the consequences of his actions impact others far more deeply than they can impact him, and it is his beloved Ianto and grandson Stephen who end up paying the ultimate price. *'It's biblical'*, remarks director Euros Lyn of Stephen's death. *'This kid that he loves is the very kid that has to die to save humanity'*. Though there are clear differences, there are certainly powerful echoes of the cross of Christ in Stephen's death. Here the handing over of one to save many becomes, not a concession to evil, but its final death-blow.

Confronted with the depravity of those who are willing to give up mankind's children without a fight, Gwen is driven to contemplate another saviour of whom Jack once spoke: *'That Doctor of his. The man who appears out of nowhere and saves the world, except sometimes he doesn't. All those times in history when there was no sign of him, I wanted to know why not. But I know the answer now. Sometimes the Doctor must look at this planet and turn away in shame'*. If *Children of Earth* declares the potential of mankind to be *'the finest species in the universe'* by making a stand and fighting for what is right, it also finds that we are capable of being little more than animals, content merely to *'accept and adapt'* in the face of evil. Seeing so many choose the latter path, Gwen finally understands why the Doctor would be fully justified in passing judgment and leaving us to our fate.

Right from the beginning, *Torchwood* has

attempted to deal with the existential fallout of living in a universe in which mankind is just one species amongst millions. In the world of the scripts, the discovery of alien life precludes the possibility of belief in God or an afterlife. This underlying thread of darkness emerges very early in *Children of Earth*, as Dr. Patanjali (Rik Makarem) tells Gwen about a Christian patient of his who lost her faith and committed suicide. *'She said she saw her place in the universe. It was tiny. She died because she thought she was nothing'*. Gwen confesses that she often experiences this same terror herself and, though able to offer no real answer, asserts that her life since joining Torchwood has been *'brilliant. And beautiful. And completely bloody magic'*. Like many other characters in *Torchwood* and *Doctor Who*, her life derives its meaning from the excitement of discovery, the exhilaration of fighting for a cause larger than herself, and the bonds of love and friendship forged along the way. The trouble with this is not the things which she values, all of which are highly laudable, but the fact that these things cannot hold meaning in themselves if the universe is ultimately empty of meaning. In such a universe Gwen has no objective moral standpoint from which to condemn those prepared to hand earth's children over, or even the actions of the 456, which are, after all, fully acceptable in their own culture. This issue is one that the program never stops to consider. The real question is not *whether* good is worth fighting for; that much, for Gwen and the rest of the Torchwood team, seems out to be self-evident. The real question is *why*.

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