Readings: Isaiah 9.2-7; John 1.1-14

The inimitable Joyce Grenfell narrates vividly the challenge of directing a nativity play. ‘Where are my Mary and Joseph? ... Don't hit each other, Mary and Joseph were friends ... Jimmy, you are my First Shepherd and not a racing car. Yes, Caroline, you're a shepherd. No, dear you can't wear your Little Bo-Peep costume because there aren’t any little girl shepherdesses in our play. ... Jimmy, do you remember what you see up in the sky? Something lovely, isn't it? No, not a baby. Try again. It’s a lovely silver star, and you are going to put your hand up and point to it. And what are you going to say when you do that? Come on, Jimmy. You are going to say, 'Behold!' aren't you? Yes, you are, dear. You said it yesterday. ... Hand in your crowns gently, please. No Sidney, you can’t wear your crown home on the bus.’

The reason Joyce Grenfell’s monologue strikes a chord is that we all know Christmas may be mostly about adults but it’s really a children's story. It’s about having too many cardboard crowns and so finding 3 kings, 3 wise men, and 3 magi, so as to give everyone a part. It’s about finding enough straw and bringing in enough animals to be authentic without making too much of a mess. It’s about saying words like 'Behold' and ‘Lo, shepherds were abiding in the field’ in high, strident, earnest voices.

But maybe there’s a conspiracy going on – a conspiracy that suits almost everyone. The reason we enjoy Joyce Grenfell is that we’re part of that conspiracy. The Christmas story's about displaced people. It’s about an untimely pregnancy. It’s about a coercive government. It’s about homelessness. It’s about living in an occupied territory. It’s about refugees. It’s about socially-excluded shepherds. It’s about a murderous tyrant. It’s about genocide. We don’t really want to think about these things so we share in a conspiracy that says Christmas is a story about adults that’s really for children. There’s so much tinsel and wrapping around the Christmas story it’s hard to get into the heart of the story itself. Tonight I want to do that by telling you something slightly different. I want to tell you a children’s story that really for adults.

The 2005 novel, also a 2008 film, The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, is set in Germany during the Second World War. The story it tells is even more brutal than the Christmas story, but it’s couched in largely allusive terms, so it gets away with being called a children’s story. Bruno is an 8-year-old boy whose father is a soldier in the Nazi war machine. Early in the film, Bruno and his family move to another part of Germany, where Bruno’s father has become the commandant of a strange kind of camp. Bruno is often alone, and eager to find things to do. Eventually he wanders out of the back yard and meanders beyond the wood, and finds a high fence. Within the fence there are people, and those people seem to be wearing striped pyjamas.

Bruno walks up to the fence and sees a boy about his own age. He introduces himself and finds that the other boy is called Shmuel. He’s fascinated by Shmuel and they have an intriguing conversation and he arranges to come back and talk some more, which he does repeatedly. The two boys play draughts through the fence and talk about many things, often having to break off their conversation for fear of being discovered. Bruno can’t fully understand why Shmuel is incarcerated, why he has to wear pyjamas, why he’s so thin and so hungry, and what role his own father has in all of this. Gradually the tension in Bruno’s own home intensifies as his mother and sister come to realise
what’s really going on in the camp. One day Bruno gets a surprise: he’s playing in his home and sees Shmuel working as a cleaner in the dining room. Bruno gives Shmuel some food. But a soldier interrupts them and demands to know why Shmuel is eating and where he got the food from. Bruno panics and says, ‘I don’t know – I’ve never seen him before.’

Bruno quickly regrets his words and soon returns to the fence, hoping to see Shmuel and be reconciled. The large black eye on Shmuel’s face tells the price Shmuel paid for Bruno’s betrayal. But Shmuel accepts Bruno’s apology. Bruno’s father finally accepts that this is no place to bring up children and arranges for his wife and family to move elsewhere. For Bruno this means the terrible prospect of leaving Shmuel. So he goes to visit Shmuel at the fence. Shmuel has got some pyjamas for Bruno to wear so he can blend into the camp and not be taken away with his family. Bruno scrambles under the fence and into the camp and dons a striped hat so no one can tell his head is unshaven. The two boys set about searching for Shmuel’s father, who’s missing.

Suddenly the atmosphere changes. Soldiers appear, corralling large groups of people in striped pyjamas towards the large barn at one end of the camp. There’s no escape, and Bruno and Shmuel are swept up into the crowd. All the people are herded like cattle down the steps and into the barn. At this point Bruno’s mother discovers he’s missing and sounds the alarm. A host of soldiers start looking for Bruno. But it’s too late. He’s in the barn beside Shmuel, and all the people in the barn are being told to take off their clothes, ready for a shower. It’s clear they realise this is going to be no ordinary shower, but the full horror of what lies ahead dawns on the prisoners, on Bruno’s family, and on the reader and viewer, all at the same time. Somehow both knowing and not knowing the terrible truth, Bruno and Shmuel clasp hands and squeeze tight, and it’s clear that nothing in the world could persuade them to let go. As the darkness descends and the gas begins to be pumped in and the horror engulfs the barn, Bruno says, ‘You’re my best friend, Shmuel. My best friend for life.’

I want to suggest to you that this story is closer to the reality of Christmas than your average children’s nativity play. Why? Because Christmas is only superficially about gold crowns and wobbly camels and tea towels on shepherds’ heads and who gets to play Mary. Christmas is really about looking at Bruno and Shmuel side by side and realising we’re looking at a picture of God and us. Jesus enters the camp of danger with every likelihood that his entry will sooner or later entail his gruesome execution. Jesus takes on the garment of exclusion and prepares to face the consequences of humanity’s rejection of God. Jesus becomes a Jew and discovers for himself the reviling and persecution Jews have known throughout the ages. Jesus becomes a little child and places himself at the mercy of adults who can’t be trusted to have any idea what they’re doing. Fundamentally, when we’re surrounded by chaos, in the midst of hell, at the mercy of cruel powers, terrified, naked, humiliated, and helpless, Jesus is right beside us, saying, ‘You’re my best friend. My best friend for life. I wouldn’t be anywhere else in the world but right here beside you.’

That’s what those mysterious words of John’s gospel mean. ‘The Word became flesh and lived among us.’ God didn’t just create us, didn’t just love us from afar, didn’t just work in history to
rescue us and strengthen us and heal us. God’s real glory, God’s true nature appears in the real, substantial, material, physical reality of Jesus among us, Jesus just like us, Jesus beside us. And beside us not just in joy and celebration, but beside us in horror, in agony, in isolation, in abandonment. Jesus is Bruno, donning the pyjamas, reshaping his whole life to be beside us, coming inside the camp of obliteration when he could just as easily have remained outside; but Jesus is just as much Shmuel, carrying that black eye, forgiving us when he’s suffered for our sin, the Jew who includes even ignorant Gentiles in the solidarity of salvation.

Whose hand is holding yours in the chaos and mayhem and terror of your world? Who is going out of their way to stand next to you this Christmas? Who has gone out of their way to make you their friend, has forgiven you when you turned your back on them, has come alongside and worn your clothes and faced the reality of your existence and known the fear that you thought was yours alone? We can have all the nativity plays we like, but sometimes it takes a little boy, maybe a little boy wearing striped pyjamas, to show us the answer to those questions. The one standing beside us, saying we’re his friend forever and clasping our hand and never letting us go, is Jesus. And the day we discover that is the best day of all. It’s Christmas Day.