

The Passion Play at Oberammergau

On Tuesday 7th June we set off from St Pancras on a "Great Rail Journey" to The Passion Play. Postponed from 2020, our journey by various trains and buses took us, and 13 others, three days to reach our destination. A pretty Bavarian Village tucked into the surrounding mountains that have seen great numbers of visitors following a vow made in 1633 during the Plague that if the dying stopped they would perform a play of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ every ten years. No one died of the plague from that day on. And so it is, with a few exceptions, every ten years from May to October the village offers their thanks to God in the form of this play.

The present day theatre holds 5000 and the stage is open and backs on to a gentle slope up to the mountain behind. The first 2 ½ hours went incredibly quickly with a superb combination of acting, singing and tableau punctuating the whole with Old Testament parallels to the Gospel Passion story. Goats, doves, camels and horses; enormous numbers, nearly 2000 actors and numerous children; costumes, confusing to start with in beautifully muted desert colours, but the main parts distinguished by something a little stronger.

The penultimate scene of in the first half, the Last Supper, was deeply moving. The foot washing was performed with such reverence and love. Then the Lord's Prayer, after the first, each line spoken by a different disciple and an interesting translation for Peter's, "Lead us when there is temptation and save us from evil". In the final scene in the Garden of Gethsemane we meet an angel - no wings, just a beautiful presence - for the first time, in this case a true messenger from God.

After a three hour interval it was back to the breath-taking second part. Promises broken, betrayal, arrest, trial, the long and tortuous walk to the Cross and the crucifixion. And then there was the juxtaposition of Judas and Peter. Judas, given a much greater part than any of the Gospels give us, with feelings of total frustration at Jesus' gentle response to the cruel and persistent questioning at his "trial", his anger at the money spent on the Nard that Magdalena anointed Jesus with, and his declaration that he could no longer follow this man who he so believed in but felt let down by the inaction when challenged. He leaves the Last Supper hurling down the common purse and betrays his master. There is a scene when on his own he reasons with himself but in the end can find no forgiveness for himself or his master and so he hangs himself. Superbly acted and a truly honest interpretation of how we might all react.

Peter, having slept in Gethsemane vows he will not deny Jesus. But of course, he does. Following the Crucifixion, Peter is devastated by this, but is helped by John on the road of forgiveness and we know Peter's story after this.

Then there were the Women, mainly Marys, who followed Jesus so faithfully throughout, who suffered with him and for him on his journey to the cross, who took him down from the cross, and at the empty tomb they are met by the angel. Their job is done.

The intensity of the acting and singing throughout felt like a true gift of these faithful people to the vow made all those years ago. And for us, an incredible and moving experience.

Mary Clarke