

“The Word” in a Play: Chancel Dramas Give Voice to Scripture

By Elizabeth Harrington

Once a month at Christ Church, Tarrytown Susan Copley, the rector, does not rise to give a sermon. Instead, parishioner Howard Lipson steps up to introduce that Sunday’s chancel drama.

Chancel dramas have been a tradition at Christ Church for over 10 years. Howard writes, casts, and directs the dramas, which are staged readings based on that Sunday’s scripture lessons. About a third of the congregation has taken part in one play or another, including both adults and children.

I recently interviewed Howard to learn more. We discussed the role and purpose of chancel dramas, and why other parishes may want to consider them as well.

CHANCEL DRAMA—SERMON OR THEATER?

Elizabeth: For those who aren’t familiar with chancel dramas, how would you describe them?

Howard: Chancel dramas are theatrical sermons. They vary widely in style. They are never without some humor. Some are outright funny, others satiric, others are fantastical. The chancel drama is always diligently faithful in its expression of the scriptures for that given Sunday. The vast majority of the time, I choose to dramatize the gospel lesson.

Elizabeth: Chancel dramas occupy the space between sheer entertainment and the means of conveying a spiritual message. How are your plays the same, or different, from a Sunday sermon?

Howard: They’re both intended to have the same result. I believe that theater’s vivid images and emotional charge can uniquely capture the gospel’s spirit and messages to make them powerful and memorable.

ACTORS ARE MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION

Elizabeth: I understand that anyone—both children and adults—who wants to take part may do so. How do you choose who will participate?

Howard: I’m glad to say that almost everyone wants to participate. It is rare for someone to refuse. It helps that I reassure and nurture everyone along the way and that the congregation is accepting and appreciative. It’s also a great way to acquaint newcomers with our parish community. At coffee hour, newcomers (as well as all who participate) are warmly thanked and complimented on their work.

FROM BIBLE STUDY TO PRODUCTION

Elizabeth: You write, rehearse, and oversee each drama in the space of a month. How do you manage that?

Howard: I research other sermons, commentaries and reflections. Ideas marinate as I begin to see the world through the prism of the gospel message. The

HOWARD LIPSON is kindly offering his scripts to all parishes in the diocese until they develop their own writers. Four of them (“Invisible Fingerprints,” “The Great Divide,” “The Third Miracle,” and “Was Blind But Now I See”) can be found at www.lazybeescripts.co.uk.



Adam Hinge, Chris Atkinson and Chris Murray in ‘Tee Off,’ based on The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16: 1-13). Photo: Howard Lipson

setting, plot and characters become clearer. Finally, the play materializes, often in a few hours. Then, I apply the theatrical skills I developed through the years as an actor, director, producer, playwright and teacher. I’m spiritually driven to make the gospel fresh, relevant and meaningful for today’s challenges. Before Sunday’s performance, it’s rehearsed just once.

SOME EXAMPLES

Elizabeth: How do you gauge the success of your productions?

Howard: Unsurprisingly, the coffee hour is enlivened with comments about the plays. Obviously, the more controversial plays garner more responses. Recently, two have elicited strong reactions. For the gospel lesson about the battle of Jesus and Satan in the desert (Luke 4:1-13), I wrote “Invisible Fingerprints.” In it, a talented reborn pop culture screenwriter is pitted against a determined and crafty film producer. The producer wins and gets everything he wants from the writer, who caves—despite being full of his new found spirit. At the end, the producer reveals himself boldly as Satan as he gloats over his conquest. Many were disturbed that Satan was the victor. I told them, “We are not Jesus, try as we might—we are flawed and fall short.”

Another recent play, “Johnny or Joanna,” was created for Luke 12:49-56. In the scripture, Jesus passionately says he did not come to earth to bring peace but fire—and that fire will result in family division. The script dramatizes how the transgender issue can divide a family. I based the play on a true story told to me by a parishioner, who spoke to us afterward about her experience with this when she worked as a counselor in a safe house for runaways. The congregation was challenged with a provocative topic presented in a personal and emotional way—and true to the gospel message.

ADVICE TO OTHER PARISHES: YOU CAN DO IT, TOO!

Elizabeth: If someone were interested in doing chancel dramas at their church, what advice would you give?

Howard: Like the Nike tagline—*Just do it!* If you build it they will come. Chancel dramas are enlightening and rewarding for the participants and the congregation. They’re a creative way to challenge and unify the parish community in what truly matters—the powerful gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Harrington is a member of Christ Church, Tarrytown.