

BORDERLAND

By
Nick Warburton



Radius

The Religious Drama Society of Great Britain



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LIST OF CHARACTERS

Cathedral staff or clergy:

CLIVE The Vice Dean

HANNAH A Staff Member

SAM* A Verger

ROBERT Director of Music

Volunteers or casual workers:

ELLEN

TOMAS

Visitors:

RONNIE

PAUL

REBECCA

* Sam, as the verger, moves freely about the Cathedral to perform his duties. This means he is able to act as storyteller and link with the audience.

THE CAST ENTER. THEY APPEAR TO BE PILGRIMS, WALKING TOGETHER AS A GROUP.

ROBERT: We walked all that day knowing only what we were leaving behind, not where we were going. Some said it was pilgrimage but to most of us it seemed as if we were running away. From fire and sword and the end of the world.

At dusk the Abbot called a stop. We stood together on a low hill where the ground was soft.

CLIVE: Here, he said. This is as far as we go.

HANNAH: He asked for a staff and one was passed forward to him. He forced it into the ground.

CLIVE: If God means us to stay, the Abbot said, he'll keep us here and he'll keep us safe. This is our place now. If they come for us, let them come. We stay here.

HANNAH: We did as he said. We stayed.

ROBERT: The next day, at first light, a bird was singing on a new bough, grown overnight from the staff.

SAM: That's the story they told, and it was something like that. This great house of God, how it came to be here, a thousand years ago. A great house filled with stories.

TOMAS: The lives it took to build it, to drag the stone, to carve it.

REBECCA: Those who stood here and said, I set that in place, that stone on the other one. I forged that bell.

ELLEN: Who said, this is where I came to give thanks. To ask for help.

ROBERT: This is where I came to hide. To sing.

SAM: This is where I shared a meal.

PAUL: This is where I was betrayed. This is where I wept.

RONNIE: Where I raised my voice in protest.

TOMAS: Where I came to remember.

HANNAH: So we stayed. Till now. This Holy Week. Today.

THEY MOVE AWAY. SAM, CLIVE AND HANNAH REMAIN. HANNAH IS YOUNG AND SYMPATHETIC. CLIVE IS SENIOR CLERGY, A RATHER FORMAL MAN. SAM IS ONE OF THE VERGERS. A MODEST PERSON AND DUTIFUL

CLIVE: People say it's old-fashioned but it's not.

SAM: Two of the clergy. Hannah and Clive. (Indicating Clive) This one's the Vice Dean.

CLIVE: It's not the same thing at all. In fact, these days it's almost radical to be a traditionalist. But this is where we came from. It's what we are.

HANNAH: It's what we were.

CLIVE: No, it's evolved, it's always evolved, but with proper consideration.

HANNAH: You mean slowly.

CLIVE: I mean it's nothing to do with fashion, or change because, just for now, we feel like a change. So change the music, change the language, change the meaning.

People have been here before us - a cloud of witnesses - and they thought and they prayed and sometimes they suffered, and as a result of this they knew things, they discovered things. And what they discovered they passed on to us. And that's a gift it would be churlish to refuse.

So we hear the words they used, and we use them ourselves, and they show us something of God's mystery. It's in the words, it's in the very words.

We say, “Lighten our darkness we beseech thee, O Lord, and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night,” and this is not just comfort: this is a way to God.

It is for me, anyway. I know there are other ways, and maybe they’re more fiery and, I don’t know, more passionate ... but for me it’s through words like those, spoken in places like this, that I approach God. Who is not, incidentally, the Big Man Upstairs and very definitely not my pal or my mate. He is almighty and everlasting God, he is the author of peace and the lover of concord.

HE MOVES OFF. HANNAH REMAINS. RONNIE COMES FORWARD. RONNIE SEES THINGS IN BLACK AND WHITE, A PERSON OF FIRM CONVICTION.

RONNIE: There should be no hiding place in a church.

SAM: Ronnie. A churchgoer, from a different church.

RONNIE: A church, I sometimes say, is like a box. And we’re all in the same box.

HANNAH: No hiding place?

RONNIE: Well, people hide here, I’ve noticed. They hang around the pillars; keep to the shadows. They avoid contact and cling to their anonymity.

HANNAH: Some people find it easier to be private in a place like this.

RONNIE: To be private? Is that the point? Ultimately you can’t hide from the Lord. Can you?

I grew up in a world where the Cathedral stood for something, in a world that was familiar with the Bible. That is no longer the case.

HANNAH: Many people are still drawn to the Cathedral.

RONNIE: That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying there used to be certainty and what we have now is backsliding, across the whole of society, and even in here.

We have it in us to reclaim the city for the Lord, to return it to the old, true ways. Because it's most certainly a Godless place at the moment.

HANNAH: Godless?

RONNIE: You know the city, do you?

HANNAH: Yes, I live here.

RONNIE: Then go to Commons Street. Take a walk down Commons Street of an evening and look in the shop windows. See what's on offer down there. Do you know what I mean?

You can place a bet, you can buy drugs, you can get a drink, you can drink as much as you like - they encourage you to do that. Go there on a Friday night and you'll see plenty of people - young people - and they're in the gutter, literally in the gutter. I weep at the thought of those young people. Because they need rescuing and I wonder who's going to do that.

So I want to ask the question: who will save these children?

What we must do - there's a movement for this - is reclaim the city for the Lord. The entire city. The shops, the offices, the estates. Including the Cathedral. That's why I'm here.

HANNAH: You plan to reclaim the Cathedral?

RONNIE: It's part of the city.

HANNAH: And you think it needs it?

RONNIE: Well, ask yourself: is it alive? Do you on a daily basis see the salvation of souls here?

HANNAH: Well -

RONNIE: And if not, you have to say to yourself, what should be done about that? I'm simply asking, how can we reclaim the city for the Lord? And where does the Cathedral stand on this?

THEY LEAVE. REBECCA ENTERS. SHE IS MODERN AND BUSY.

REBECCA: I've been past here lots of times.

SAM: Rebecca, who lives in the city. She's never been inside the Cathedral.

REBECCA: Which is odd really because it's more or less the heart of town. And you can see it for miles. Anyway, on this particular day I decided to go inside and take a look. Just on a whim.

Well, not really a whim, to be honest. There was a protest going on outside, on Cathedral Green. People often gather there to shout about something or other – local transport or immigration or something. This one was about reclaiming the city. And it looked as if they were stopping passers-by so I thought, I'm not risking that, I'll go through the Cathedral instead. Worth paying the entrance fee to save yourself getting drawn in.

And the Cathedral was nicer than I imagined. I mean, walking where people have walked for a thousand years, I quite liked the idea of that.

Anyway, this woman started speaking to me. She called me over and asked me about the Cathedral. "What do you know about it? What can you tell me?"

I said, "I'm sorry, I don't know much at all. I'm not a guide."

But she told me to look up at the walls. At the windows, at the stonework. "That arch of coloured glass," she said. "The weight of that tower."

And then I realised: she wasn't asking, she was telling me. "These are the solid things," she said, "between us and God. That's what the Cathedral is. Go inside. Step into the Nave. And look up."

"Look up?" I said. "Look at what?"

"Just look. And listen. See what's there. This is a space between God and the people. Between heaven and earth," she said. "A borderland. Where we approach God. And God listens to us."

So I thought I would. Go in and see what's there.

**SHE MOVES AWAY. ELLEN ENTERS. SHE IS A VOLUNTEER.
UNASSUMING, TIRED.**

ELLEN: I come here three mornings a week.

SAM: To volunteer. To work in the shop. This is Ellen.

ELLEN: I like it here, where everything's always been so still. People are praying now. The Dean, all available clergy, one or two early-comers. At prayer. Some kneeling, and some crouched in their seats, trying to look as if they're kneeling. They say the words with one voice, as they always have. The same words, year after year.

I wonder about that sometimes. Wonder about praying, I mean. Retrospectively.

If something happens, say, some terrible thing, and you respond with a kind of prayer, is that a waste of time? You think, oh God, that poor woman, or God be with her or something. But it's too late because it's already happened and the prayer is ... it's ...

It goes into the past where nothing can change. So is that a waste of time?

Because you can't go back. You can't change things.

I don't know. I sometimes think about my daughter and I say the words to myself. If I said them out loud they'd sound like a prayer. Some sort of prayer for help.

Today they're about to say the words they've always said.

HANNAH: Let us humbly confess our sins unto Almighty God.

(MAYBE OTHERS JOIN IN)

Almighty and most merciful Father ...

We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep ...

We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts ...

We have offended against thy holy laws.

ELLEN MOVES AWAY AS PAUL ENTERS. PAUL IS DISHEVELLED AND ANGRY.

PAUL: Will you let me in!?! Come on, come on!

SAM: Paul. Who comes to the Cathedral for an argument.

PAUL: I have to get in here!

CLIVE ENTERS

CLIVE: Do you mind? There's a service taking place.

PAUL: Ah, at last. I can't get in.

CLIVE: No, well, the gates are locked. They're locked until nine. Unless you've come for the service -

PAUL: The service? No -

CLIVE: For which you're invited to enter through the door into the North Transept -

PAUL: I don't want the service.