*What do you personally perceive the value of the Mystery Plays to be to York and why?*

**Vivienne Faull, the Dean:** It depends at what level we’re talking. In terms of keeping the stories alive, these are a local version from the early modern period of the biblical stories, and at a time when many people are not nearly as familiar with these stories it’s tremendously important to use this particular art form to enable future generations to learn these stories and pass them on. So they are part of cultural inheritance, which is also religious inheritance, and I think that’s really important. I found it fascinating during the Mystery Plays seeing how a local community had formed these stories at a time when the bible was not easily accessible in the vernacular, and to see which stories they told and how they told them. In this Reformation year it’s absolutely fascinating to see some themes emerging already, that were in one sense to find their real impact in the sixteenth century at the Reformation, so you can already see the sort of thinking that was to become the majority view in the sixteenth century beginning to emerge in the centuries before that. So it’s cultural history. And indeed as religious history the Plays are profoundly important. They are also important in bringing this city together because as I was explaining to someone last night, who comes from outside the city, they were asking ‘is there a lot of enthusiasm for the Mystery Plays?’, and I explained that the Mystery Plays in York don’t belong to anybody. And that’s both gloriously free of obvious political baggage, but also gloriously free for there to be deep uncertainty about the future. So I think those two things are part of the tension of the York cycle, which of course is the most complete cycle as opposed to Chester or Wakefield, in the country.

*So building from that, what do you perceive the theological statement of the York Mystery Plays to be in the present day?*

It’s something that we continue to wrestle with as a church, about faith being a matter of primary importance for lay people. The Plays were an expression of lay people and not of ecclesiastical control: this was beyond the control of the clergy, of bishops and of anyone that wanted to control doctrine. And that’s why I think they are part of this extraordinary bubbling up of the new thinking in the early modern period, so theologically that’s something that continues to be very important. Our own church debated the contribution of the lay voice to the church, but also to wider society, at its recent governing body meeting and its something that we still continue to debate. On the one hand, we still say we want to encourage lay people to lead the church in all sorts of ways, but every time there’s a difficult issue the bishops get all frightened and say ‘we must keep control’. And what I find extraordinary about the dynamic of the Mystery Plays is people will say ‘this is our faith’; literally this is our faith.

*Why did the Minster decide to put on the Plays in 2016 after a gap of 16 years?*

I think there may have been be a hope after 2000 that we would put on the Mystery Plays every ten years as part of our contribution to the cycle. But in the year 2010, we were a bit busy planning for the restoration of the East Front, and that was under tight pressure of time because it was a Heritage Lottery Funded project that you have to start and finish within five years, and if you don’t then you don’t get the money. So we were a bit constrained and that was the Minster’s focus at the time. So as soon as I arrived I was asked whether I would consider allowing the Mystery Plays to be put on in the Minster again. There was a feeling that if they didn’t happen reasonably soon in the Minster again then it would be a long time before they happened again at all. And the York Minster Mystery Plays Board- which had been responsible for the 2000 production- was particularly concerned that we should go ahead. We discussed it with colleagues and thought that it fitted so well with our own priorities, which include enabling everyone to discover the love of God and telling the story of Jesus Christ, which we articulate as the main drivers (alongside various others) that everyone set to it with a will. It was a very different world in 2016 for the Minster from 2000 because in the interim we began charging for entrance, and that considerably changed our business model. So the sacrifice was much greater. 2000 being the millennium had a particular and proper focus for being in the Minster. I started by saying that in York nobody owns the Mystery Plays; there is no sense that in the future we will say that this must happen every ten years. Even though I think that’s what people would quite like to do. I was speaking to Richard Shepherd who composed the score both for the 2016 and 2000 productions, calculating if we did it again in 2026 or 2027 he would be 80-something and possibly not around, and he said ‘well, maybe’!

*So given that the 2016 production was critically acclaimed and seen by over 26,000 people but didn’t cover its costs, what would the Minster do differently to get around that next time?*

Do a lot more fundraising further in advance! We were hit by various things inevitably. You make the decision sometimes out, and then when we got into things like fundraising we were by then without a fundraiser in the Minster and that part of the preparation really didn't happen. And the second thing is that the lack of sponsorship wasn't very significant, so we knew was very unlikely we’d get anything significant from local authorities, or from Nestle or from any other major donors that we had in the past. So perhaps it’s unsurprising that we weren’t as successful in plugging that bit of the gap. Some of the lessons we have learnt have been about the length of the production. The writer was commissioned to produce something that would come in at two and a quarter hours plus an interval, but then we got to the dress rehearsal and we were still way over three hours. At that point, even though he was contracted to produce something that came in on time to help us come in on budget, we didn’t. So I think we’ve learnt quite a lot about working with artistic directors. However wonderful they are it needs to be understood why the production needs to be somewhat shorter than he wanted to allow by the time it went into the final stages of the production. That’s not to say it wasn’t a very fine interpretation of the text, it’s just partly that it needed a lot more tightening up as people simply won’t tolerate that long endurance test in the Minster, and also people need to get home. So what we discovered was the matinees were full; it was the evening performances that suffered particularly, because people couldn’t get home in busses or trains. In York people get home on busses and trains. So we’ve learnt first of all do much more fundraising, and secondly be much sharper on the length of the production. Or perhaps starting earlier, but what would be the knock on effect of that with regards to our routine of worship etc. And what else we might do in order to make it easier for people to enjoy the whole performance? There were a lot of people who I think came for the first half and left, and I think that’s a shame.

*I suppose on the funding side that’s an issue that’s of particular interest to the Trust. Is there a role that you see for the Trust in fundraising, and also more generally?*

Yes, I think there could well be. Once the decision can be taken- if it can be- and of course it’s really difficult as I’m bidding my successes inevitably, but we are now planning much further ahead generally in the Minster and we’re looking forward to a very significant **Paulinus** anniversary in 2027. The sense is this may fit really well in terms of the story of Christianity, and in this part of the country, if we were to put the Mystery Plays on in 2027. That’s what is in our mind, and we now do plan several years ahead, whereas when I first arrived we weren’t quite as good at that. We can be less spontaneous now- that’s the downside- but the upside is we’ve all said we need a five year run-in to the Mystery Plays and not a two year run-in to them. And if we’ve got a five year run-in, we can work much more closely with collaborators, partners, sponsors, and so forth, and raise money in advance. The Trust could become absolutely crucial at that point

*Going back to the message of the Mystery Plays; Do you think that the stories with the angels with the fluffy wings etc. are a less relevant way of preaching the Christian message in the 21st Century, or do you disagree with that statement?*

Angels are an intrinsic part of the Christian story. Particularly of the way it’s told by the community here. There’s an interesting dynamic between good and evil, and I think that’s what struck me. In theological terms we call this dualism, and the profound dualism of the Mystery Plays with the struggle between good and evil is played out in the form of a struggle between angels and demons (and a principal angel and a principal demon). That’s at the heart of the dynamic of the Plays, and I think that’s entirely relevant to people who are living in hard times and in a world where we are struggling with war and a lot of violence and increasing threat. So in one sense I feel this has got a contemporary feel to it, and I’m sure another artistic director would similarly want to work at that. There were interesting decisions that the artistic director took about conflating the last battle in the Harrowing of Hell. But I think it would be very interesting, depending on the geopolitical context over the next decade of how that is played out. I used a prayer at **Evensong** just this last Monday which comes from the Celtic Christian tradition, with a very strong sense of the enchantment of the whole world and the profound sense of God’s presence in and around all things. Praying for the accompaniment of the presence of God or angelic powers. I used this thinking this will be very foreign to those who attend, but immediately after the service one of our youngest came up to me and said ‘what was that prayer you used, it was wonderful, please can I have a copy?’ and he really surprised me. Partly because of where he goes to church (**St Michael le Belfry**), which I don’t think does much about fluffy angels there because it tends to be rather more masculine! But he found himself the presence of God in all things in our daily lives really powerful. So I believe that this is something that’s coming back into relevance rather than disappearing.

*With what you’ve just said, do you think that the medieval interpretations should definitely be retained then, as opposed to a more post-modern interpretation?*

I do actually. And another piece of evidence for that is cathedrals are refocusing their attention on their shrines of saints. We’re working on that here because St William (or at least his shrine!) was sent downstairs by Henry the 8th- at least he wasn’t banished completely- and we’re wanting to bring him upstairs again. If I talk to my colleagues at St. Alban’s where they have brought the tomb of St. Alban and the relics of St. Alban back into their life. I have just been to St. David’s, where they have just gloriously refurbished the tomb of St. David. And **Hereford** cathedral, where they have done the same with their shrines. And what that has done in terms of people coming to pray is quite extraordinary. The research we’ve done very recently lead by the University of York, but actually an international study, of how people are relating to these buildings suggests we are seeing a very strong trend towards people coming in and seeing this place as a profoundly spiritual place. The shrines are the focus of that spirituality and become the heart of the building, and that’s very powerful. And these are all pre-Reformation things, so alongside telling the stories of the bible in the vernacular you’ve also got a going back to this sense of the world being inhabited by spiritual beings as well as physical beings. So those two things from the medieval period are actually coming back into force, and that has been very surprising to all the scholars who expected there to be a much more secularising approach!

*I actually find that so interesting! And is there a wider role for the Minster alongside all the churches in York in supporting the continuation of the Plays overall?*

I’m just wondering whether the Supporters Trust needs to stimulate the churches to think harder about how all the churches work for whatever the next stages are- whether it’s the Waggon Plays, or the Plays more generally on the street, or bringing it back to the Minster, or going to other places or other uses of that tradition. I think there is a role for the churches of York, not least because we tend to be fragmented and anything that could pull is together is important. This could really properly pull us all together, because it transcends the barriers of denomination and tradition, and it brings all of our communities together. We do have folk from all sorts of communities participating front and backstage: those with faith, those without faith, those that have questions about faith, and those who come from different churches all participating together in the same community. And I think that is really powerful.

*In which ways do you perceive the Trust to be of value to the maintenance of the York Mystery Plays?*

The Trust is crucial as a holding mechanism, because otherwise there’s this sense of no one owning the Plays, and the risk is that they won’t ever happen again now because life moves on fairly fast. There maybe is, in the wider community, a bit more of a secular approach to things, so I think it would be really helpful if the Supporters Trust could negotiate some sort of timetable. I think a crucial next meeting with the new Chief Executive of the York Theatre Royal to see what’s going on there, and maybe then with Riding Lights to see what their aspirations are. They’re the other two big players in the big productions. If the Minster was to say ‘I think we will have recovered enough to do this in 2026/2027’, then there are several years in between where there is plenty of space for other productions still. I think that sort of brokering, as well as keeping alive the awareness of the tradition, will be really important.

***Questions:*** *Melanie McLaughlan*