

Sue Johnston – What Mary means to me



Presenter Sue Johnston admits that the image she held of the woman at the heart of Christian belief was “rocked” by the research featured in BBC One’s *The Virgin Mary*. But, the 58-year-old actress says, she came away from the project with her love for Mary’s story strengthened and a powerful impression of an extraordinary and inspiring figure.

Warrington-born Sue, who shot to fame in TV’s *Brookside* and later won fans as the downtrodden Barbara in cult comedy *The Royle Family*, grew up with a very clear idea of who Mary was.

“I was brought up with a strong Christian background and went to church, Sunday school, evensong and all of that as a child. I think my parents wanted to give me a good religious background and I did believe in everything we learnt there at the time.

“I had a very clear image of Mary and it was the one we all have – of the mother-and-child

Nativity scene, with Mary in her blue gown, looking very serene,” says Sue.

“It’s a beautiful, ethereal image and Mary’s story itself has always had that otherworldly quality. You just accept it – the Immaculate Conception and the Nativity – and somehow believe in it because we were taught that God is all-powerful, so anything could happen.

“Before this film,” she adds, laughing, “I don’t think I ever gave much thought to Mary going through the thrashes of labour or anything like that – even as a young teenager when practically every other thought in my head was about how babies are born.”

For many years, the actress confesses, she didn’t think about Mary’s story at all, though she never doubted that Jesus existed and “always loved” the story of the Nativity. Then, a couple of years ago, she landed a role as Mary in a production of *The Mysteries* at London’s National Theatre.

“I was Mary in the third play, which is about her ascension into Heaven. And, suddenly, faced with this story about Mary, I thought: ‘Gosh – that woman had a life, she had an existence and though she’s from a story that’s been handed down over the years, she might have had a life as a very real woman in very different circumstances’.”

It is exactly this idea that *The Virgin Mary* fleshes out, says Sue. And, upon reading the research presented in the programme, one thing struck the presenter immediately.

“It was the ‘myth of the blue’ that shocked me the most,” she says, referring to the research which suggests that it is highly unlikely that Mary would have dressed in blue robes. Blue dye, the programme hears, simply wasn’t available to most Galilean people at that time and she is far more likely to have worn simple wool or cotton tunics.

The blue robes, it is thought, were the creation of later writers and Renaissance painters. “But it’s like Chinese whispers,” says Sue. “We embellish stories sometimes to suit our own purposes and the Church loved the image of Mary in blue and it is an extraordinarily compelling image. But for me, realising that the image I grew up with, the beautiful paintings of Mary, all that serenity ... to think that that couldn’t have been – well, it sort of rocks the whole thing.”

For *The Virgin Mary*, Sue travelled to Malula, an isolated hamlet in Syria, home to several important Christian holy sites, including the fourth-century St Sergius’s Church, and where the local people still speak Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus.

“Going to Malula was extraordinary. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen a landscape so barren but the people were amazing, just so friendly,” she says. “I talked to young girls there and it really made me think ... in all probability, Mary would have been 12 or 13 when she became pregnant, so when you meet a 12- or 13-year-old in this day and age out there, it’s quite a shock to see how little they are. The thought of them

being given to an older man like Joseph, who was probably in his thirties, it’s incredible.”

For Sue, working on the programme became something of a personal journey.

“I think they chose me to present it because I do question [the story] but I also love the story. I’m not going to go in there and lambaste it. That’s not what the programme is about. It’s about questioning the story and opening it up for discussion and debate. It’s not saying, ‘This didn’t happen and you’ve all been led up the garden path’. What it does is take a story that lots of us know and love and reveal what the reality was probably like.

“I certainly loved it when my son was in the Nativity as a child and I love that part of Christmas. The story is quite important to me and it’s always been in my life. But it seems separate now from my own questioning of religion and spiritualism. It’s just a separate story for me. But it isn’t for some people and I think you have to respect that and say: ‘This isn’t an answer, none of us has an answer but this is just a way of looking at how stories develop’.

“For me, *The Virgin Mary* draws the human side of the story out from the myth and what the reality may have been is equally as amazing as the Mary we’ve given this other history to. What she achieved, and how she lived her life, was extraordinary.”