
The Dove

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St. Columba's, Upper Gray St.

OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY 2010

In July 2007 Mgr McNally led a parish pilgrimage to the Bavarian monastery at Benedictburen. On one of our outings we visited Oberammergau and many of us were enthralled. We wanted to return in 2010 and with the skilful organisation of Caroline McInnes, June Halliday and "Tailored Travel", we were able to accomplish this. We began the week in the beautiful Austrian Tyrol visiting Salzburg and Innsbruck, then early on the Friday morning our coach took us to Oberammergau.

What prompted the origin of the Passion Play? In 1633 the plague, which was prevalent in Europe, arrived in this village, and after many inhabitants had died the Elders of the Community made a vow that a play of the Passion would be enacted every ten years if the rest of the villagers were spared, and apparently that is what happened. At first the play was performed once or twice each decade, in the church graveyard. Over the years its fame spread, there were more performances, and the first package tour was organised by Thomas Cook in the mid 19th century. This year the play will be enacted 102 times, in the specially built auditorium which seats over 4000 people.

The actors and musicians are all local and must have been born in the village or lived there for 20 years; the costumes and sets are also made locally. Music plays a huge part in the play, interspersing scenes with solos or a chorus. Most of the music, wonderful chorales, dates from 1820; the rest is more modern but always melodious. A white-robed choir number about forty. The excellent orchestra is hidden under the stage but they make a great sound.

The action unfolds from the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem right up to the Resurrection, but in between these scenes there are "Living Tableaux" (statue-like pictures with real people) which depict episodes from the Old Testament, beginning with Adam and Eve in the Garden and ending with Abraham about to sacrifice his son Isaac, thus reinforcing the significance of Jesus. The performance is very convincing and emotional, particularly Jesus at Gethsemane which ends the first part, and the loving way in which Jesus is taken down from the cross in the second part. The play ends with a joyful Halleluja as the disciples realise that Jesus has risen.

Gwynneth Wright

The St Columba's pilgrimage, blessed by the presence of Bishop Ian Murray, was also supported by members of St Peter's (appropriately enough since countless churches visited by us en route are dedicated to SS. Peter and Paul in full baroque --- the Oberammergau church even has the tell-tale cock before Peter, although its real-life counterpart was the only notable absentee from the staged Passion).

This year's text has been worked over closely with Jewish authorities: earlier versions won applause from vicious anti-Semites including Wagner and Hitler, who cited it for his murderous campaign against the Jews. Possibly the best account in English of an inter-war production by an eye-witness, fictionalised in Elinor M. Brent-Dyer's *The Chalet School and Jo*, tells us that the man playing Judas 'had to be guarded as he went about the streets, for the people in their fury would have harmed him. And he is a good man, too'. Today Judas is played with sympathy as well as horror while eradicating the ugly Christian tradition typifying the Jews by him (regardless of Our Lord, Our Lady and all the other disciples also being Jews). The chief priests Annas (old and embittered) and Caiaphas (dignified and politic) still hound Jesus all the way to Calvary (in reality they could never have gone there, since it would have polluted them at Passover), and were played with dignity if intransigence (recalling the corrupt Abbot and Bishop in *The Thrie Estates* as played in Tom Fleming's Festival production by Andrew Cruickshank and Roy Hanlon). John, as always, was touchingly youthful, the only man faithful unto Jesus's death (although at one point chased off stage in mortal terror). He gravitated to sustain Our Lady convincingly, but modern retreat from Mariolatry now gives her too feeble a role, whereas in fact she was probably the strongest mind on Calvary, sustaining John after Jesus's death. Our Lord himself may have been more convincingly represented than in any film, His human vulnerability realised in an almost unbearable Agony in the Garden where human sins throughout history cascaded invisibly on him. The theatre's auditorium is closed, but the stage is open to a naturally darkening sky whose darkness at the Crucifixion prevents your continuing to make use of the helpful bilingual texts. And the superbly directed crowds of children, adults and singers used rural wisdom even providing a horse for the leering Herod.

Owen Dudley Edwards