

**A Sermon preached for Warwick Words Service 2013**  
**on *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell**

**Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Acts 1: 1-9**

*Moses said: 'Make this response before the LORD your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.' (Dt 26: 5)*

*In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. (Acts 1: 1-2)*

What do these five novels have in common? *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles, *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, *Ulysses* by James Joyce. There may be other connections but, at one time or another, they've all been thought to be un-filmable and yet they have been brought to the big screen (with varying degrees of success!) *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell (the novelist not the comedian) also belongs in this collection. It was published in 2004 and made into a film last year with an impressive cinematic pedigree – directed by the Wachowski siblings (best known for the *Matrix* trilogy) and starring Oscar winners Tom Hanks, Halle Berry and Jim Broadbent. Yet it bombed critically and at the box office.

The reason lies with the complex web of storytelling in Mitchell's original book, which involves six interlocking narratives reaching across time and imagination. The novel opens in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the diary of Adam Ewing, an American traveling across the Pacific back to San Francisco. It then leaps to a series of letters from Belgium written in the early '30s where a recently graduated musician from the University of Cambridge is searching for a retired and reclusive composer to act as his assistant. This segues into a story about a Californian journalist investigating corruption amongst politicians, oil executives and the nuclear power industry in the 1970s. The next strand moves to the 1990s recounting the tribulations of a small-time publisher London publisher whose brother (for revenge) has him committed to a care home. Then we head into the future with the final narratives being a dystopian vision of South Korea in which the consumer capitalism of shopping malls and the cuisine of fast food outlets have taken over the world. That merges into a story where an apocalypse has brought the dystopia to an end and humanity survives in a return to tribalism. Having reached that narrative pinnacle, we then descend the mountain by revisiting and updating the strands of each story to reach the conclusion.

If that sounds complicated, *Cloud Atlas* is a complex read for three reasons: first, keeping track of the story we're in at the moment; second, looking out for the connections between the six layers of storytelling; and third, each section has its own distinct voice and in some cases vocabulary, which can take some adjusting to on the part of the reader as we move from one to the other. What the film really helps with are the latter *two* challenges. Since the stories are more finely cut and interwoven, it's easier to see the connections between all of them. And since the distinction between the times is visual rather linguistic which makes adjustment less demanding. But a problem remains with keeping track of the storylines and it really helps to have read the book (or at least a good plot synopsis) before watching the movie.

Having said that, there are some wonderful observations in Mitchell's original which don't make it onto the big screen. At one point the amoral Robert Frobisher offers his thoughts about faith. He writes in one letter: 'Haven't been to church since the morning Pater cast me out ... People knelt in prayer, some moving their lips. Envy 'em, really I do. I envy God, too, privy to their secrets. Faith – the least exclusive club on Earth – has the *craftiest* doorman. Every time ... I've stepped through its wide-open *doorway* ... I find myself [suddenly] stepping out on the street again' (p 75). Probably Frobisher speaks for many in describing his experience of faith and church. And I loved the observation drawn from dog racing by Timothy Cavendish, the small-time London publisher struggling to come to terms with what was happening to him. 'Sometimes,' he says, 'the fluffy bunny of incredulity zooms round the bend so rapidly that the greyhound of language is left, agog, in the starting cage' (p 170). A surprising image for that sense of surprise we all feel sometimes.

A key metaphor for understanding the story comes from Robert Frobisher who's been trying to find some evidence of what happened to his brother Adrian who never returned from The Great War: After visit war graves he writes soulfully: 'All those Adrians jammed like pilchards in the cemeteries throughout eastern France, western Belgium, beyond. We cut a pack of cards called historical context – our generation cut tens, jacks and Queens. Adrian's cut threes, fours and fives' (p 459).

That sense of similar human characters in parallel stories facing the challenges of the times in which they've been set is something which emerges from both novel and film. Themes of trust and betrayal are found in each of the strands as are the topics of religion and faith. The Church and those who use and abuse religious faith are in the 19<sup>th</sup> century journal of Adam Ewing and still present in the post-apocalyptic world seen through the eyes and memories of tribal leader Zachry. Religious faith plays an ambiguous role throughout the story – it exists at every level of the narrative and those who have it can be both a force for good and for ill, as can those who base their life on a scientific outlook.

The ongoing narrative framework of people's lives which Mitchell explores in his novel is not far removed from the world of the Bible. Those two quotes from our Old and New Testament lessons provide the storied basis for individuals and communities to see their lives – that creed in Deuteronomy is the salvation story of the Children of Israel and with the introduction to the Acts of the Apostles Luke is giving a succinct re-telling of the Christian 'story so far'.

Both the novel *Cloud Atlas* and the film find a conclusion in Adam Ewing's observation that: 'only as you gasp your dying breath shall you understand, your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean! Yet what is an ocean but a multitude of drops?' (p 529). Yes, but ... for humanity, even oceans have stories: the stories of those people who've sailed upon them and the story of how the shape of oceans has been reconfigured by tectonic plates over time.

Warwick Words in 2013 is a reminder that it's in those *stories* we find meaning and for those still telling the story of Moses and the story of Jesus in terms of Moses ... the multitude of drops in the ocean is not an ocean of chaos or meaninglessness but an ocean of stories told within the context of *God's* story in and beyond creation.

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*October 2013*