

Today, I am going to respond to a challenge laid down for me during the lunch we enjoyed together the first Sunday I was here. I was talking about TV, and was busy telling the people near me how challenging even programmes you assume are only entertainment can be. I said that Dr Who was deeply theological. An opinion I seemed to be the only person to hold – in fact, an opinion that would have been laughed at had you not been such polite people! So today, I thought I would pick apart the first episode of the current series of Dr Who – the episode that laid down the foundations for the whole series - and let you see what caused me to say it had theological content. It'll be interesting to hear from you afterwards whether you think I'm right or not.

Dr. Who, as I suspect we all know, is an alien time and space traveller with a peculiar fondness for earth and humans. It's a BBC series which has recently been revived – it first ran in the 60s, when I remember being healthily scared by the Daleks and the evil alien races, though I never did hide behind the sofa! Dr Who is a Time Lord, who looks like a human – well, more accurately, various human men as he regenerates into different actors. He has two hearts, and, of course, access to technology far in excess of our human command of technology – but the sort of technology we can conceive of. An example? His sonic (that's the high-tech part) screwdriver (that's the mundane part). He usually travels with one or more human assistants, more often young women than men – but for a time he had a pet robot dog – K9. I could talk already about the relationship between the Doctor and those assistants – the amount to which he is dominating and manipulating them, rather than allowing them to act as free agents, and for that matter about the dog, treated, apparently randomly, with affection in the way you and I would handle a loved pet and clinically as an expendable machine. But if I start talking about historical episodes, not only will we be here all night, you won't stand a chance of remembering the story line of the episode I'm on about. So I'll limit myself to the opening episode of the current series.

Which you might not have watched. So just let me summarise the story for you. A young trainee doctor works in a hospital. She has a modern family – a sister and a brother, divorced mother and father, and a stepmother. Dr Who and what turns out to be an alien criminal on the run are patients in the hospital. The whole hospital is transported to the moon by another alien race who are intergalactic policemen. The policemen search for the alien patient who initially fools them by drinking human blood so that their scans show her to be human. Dr Who fools her into consuming his blood, she is detected and executed, and the aliens leave, transporting the hospital back to earth just before the air in the hospital runs out

and all the occupants suffocate. Despite these earth-shattering events, the trainee doctor goes to a family party (her brother's 21st in fact), but encounters the Doctor again in the middle of an explosive family row sparked off by rivalry between her mother and stepmother, and eventually she leaves with the doctor in the TARDIS (that famous police box) for the next week's adventure.

And I'm betting that you are still scratching your heads wondering how on earth I am going to justify the claim that an episode of galactic cops and robbers could possibly have any theology in it! In fact, any issues of substance, rather than pure entertainment.

There are a few pointers that your antennae should be twitching at in some of the names that are used. The name of the hospital is Royal Hope. Hope. The young doctor is Martha – Martha, the practical one around Jesus.

So who's Jesus? Dr Who, of course. How many times has he saved humanity over the years? And this episode is no exception. He is the only one other than the intergalactic cops and the evil alien who understands what is going on – and the only one who cares about the threat which extends beyond the estimated 1000 patients and staff in the hospital to half the human race in the course of the programme. And in the end, the only way he is able to be sure of saving the humans is to lure the alien into drinking his blood. What does the communion wine stand for in mainstream Christianity? Blood, of course. The alien believes Dr Who is human (and by the way, there we have him appearing both human (to the alien) and greater than human (to Martha) – remind you of anyone in the Bible?). Anyway, the alien believes that Dr Who is human and that drinking his blood will make her appear human to the police scanners. Of course, in fact it is precisely his alien blood that betrays her. The scan would also have betrayed him, of course – but it proves him dead, and therefore of no interest to the police. But you can't have Dr Who dying in the opening episode of a whole new series, now can you? What would you do with the rest of the programmes you've scheduled? He is brought back to life by Martha, who gives him the kiss of life and heart massage – on both his hearts. So again like Jesus, he rises from the dead. I think there are too many parallels there for us to be able to suggest that they are down to coincidence. But we have to wonder whether at some sub-conscious level, the writers of this episode were simply influenced by the Bible stories of Jesus. After all, the Bible stories run right through our culture. Even if you aren't religious and don't go to church, you can't avoid hearing about them and being influenced by them. Where else did they get the basic story for Joseph and his amazing technicoloured dream coat? I suspect the

reality show auditions for the lead role in the Lloyd Webber production of it which incidentally also appear on a Saturday night draw an even bigger audience than Dr Who – and by the time the successful candidate has been chosen, all of that audience will have learned a little something about the Bible. So I think I have scored one theological point out of Dr Who – Jesus. And I'll give you the names – Martha's and the hospital's for free.

But theology isn't just or even, for us Unitarians, about the Bible. It finds its expression in our everyday lives. And Martha's family presents us with two of the more common issues we have to address in English society today. Each of us has to decide what we feel about them. Even if we aren't personally affected, someone in our family or close friends will be. One is the issue of split families. The beginning of the programme shows Martha on the mobile, conducting I think 3 conversations simultaneously, planning her brother's 21st. A joyous occasion. And the separated father rings up. He makes the point that he is the father, and asks for the privilege of being allowed to pay half the cost of the party. How do we react with people who have been involved in divorces? Days were when we tried to find an easy solution, as a society, and decide that one party was in the right – and the other was in the wrong. And make the guilty party suffer. In fact, of course, there is no such thing as clear innocence and guilt in any human situation. Both parties are partly in the right and partly in the wrong. We have acknowledged this – but we still face issues whenever we deal with divorce situations – as we all do, every day. And this is one. What rights and duties should the parent who is not bringing the children up have? How will the children react to that parent when they grow to adulthood? It's the issue Fathers for Justice – the ones who do all those stunts to draw attention to their grievances – are pointing out.

And there's another issue there. Martha, her mother, her father, her brother and her sister are all black. The father's new wife is a white bleached blonde bombshell. Superficial, selfish, vain, and everything a formula for a temptress is. That mobile phone conversation is interrupted by her demand to be taken shopping – and the way she makes sure that that is what happens is, of course, canoodling. At the end, the family argument is between her and Martha's mother. The initial cause is Martha's mother calling her fake tan orange, but it soon becomes clear that the argument is actually over her using her siren skills to lure Martha's father away from his wife. We all know that getting married isn't the end of finding other people attractive. So here's another challenge – for those of us in a committed relationship - to think through how we would handle an attraction which could put an end to that relationship. And I'm sure

you've spotted the other issue. The "goodies" in this sub plot are black, and the baddy is white. Our stereotyping is to use white as shorthand for good and black as shorthand for bad – and we do it in religion where angels are white and the devil black as well as in our everyday life. And that is bound not to be true. So here's Dr Who reminding us not to trust to stereotypes but to use our own judgement.

I suspect by now you might have decided that perhaps I'm not totally off my trolley talking about theology in Dr Who. Let's try another example.

In the hospital, before all the mayhem lets loose, we are introduced to one of those traditional consultant doctors, beautifully dressed and very self-important. He is followed round by a gaggle of attentive medical students and knows absolutely everything. And delights in displaying his knowledge at the cost of showing up the students. It doesn't suit him that Dr Who knows who discovered static electricity – he wanted to be the only one to know. But when the mayhem breaks loose, and the hospital is transported to the moon, he shows his humanity. He accepts that he is going to die (after all, he is a doctor and therefore familiar with death), but he counts the cost – not seeing his daughter graduate, for example. And having demonstrated that he is human, he is the first victim of the rogue alien – she drinks his blood, drains him dry, and leaves him dead. He's a figure which reminds us, all of us, that no matter how distinguished we may be, no matter how many letters we may have after our own name, no matter how many expensive meals we may have been able to treat ourselves to, no matter how well dressed we are, no matter how much other people defer to us, we are still all, in the final analysis **human**. With human failings and weaknesses, yes, and needs.

I haven't talked to you about the relationship between Martha and the Doctor. Intentionally, because to my mind it's a bit problematic. Previous assistants have been denied full humanity. They have been just assistants. But the early signs were that the writers intend Martha to be more independent, as indeed, she has proved to be. Dr Who recruits her to help him at the beginning of the episode precisely because, unlike the other characters, she is able to reason that the windows aren't what is keeping the air in the hospital – they aren't airtight. And of course she is an educated woman. Not far away from becoming a doctor – when he introduces himself, she says that she will be a doctor too – and his equal – once she has passed some exams. He mentions the loss of the last assistant, Rose, with some regret. There is inevitably the tension of him kissing Martha – which he later justifies as the transfer of sufficient

alien material to her to excite the interest of the intergalactic police and enable her to delay them finding him. Well, there has to be a love interest, now doesn't there? But at the end of the programme, she is given free and informed choice, and she **chooses** to accompany him on an adventure on condition that she is returned to the current time and location so that she can fulfil her responsibilities. She is a real person, complete with responsibilities and ambitions, and able to make free decisions. Far more rounded than poor Rose ever was. Far more like mainstream Christianity would suggest that God created humanity.

So I hope I have showed you that I'm not a complete idiot, and that you can see challenges in Dr Who. I suspect if I were to ask you how many of you think you might have a go at watching the next episode, even if science fiction isn't normally your bag, it would be a larger number than saw the last one. But my purpose wasn't to justify myself – or publicise Dr Who! It was to illustrate how we are faced with challenges every day. Challenges that, if we recognise them and use them, cause us to think through some of our assumptions. And those challenges aren't just about our everyday lives, they can be about our standards. They can be about our beliefs. We Unitarians often say how we embrace challenge and insight – in our own beliefs just like in everything else. But it's very easy to lapse and just take things easy. Just to experience that episode of Dr Who as a piece of superficial entertainment – and that's the tempting option, rather than to take on the challenges in it. Let's all resolve to embrace just one challenging thought every day.