

Philani's work



The lead up to Christmas in the south is a strange experience for a northerner. It just doesn't seem right to have Christmas in sunshine and heat, despite the event we mark having taken place in a warm country over 2,000 years ago. Traditions that feel inherently coldweatherish, such as eating roast dinners and brandy-smothered, flaming puddings, appear rather out of place when exotic birds are singing, bright days are long and scant clothing is the order of the day in Cape Town. As in Britain, families turned out in their droves to enjoy the annual switching on of the Christmas lights in Adderley Street, but there was a big difference – they preceded the event by picnicking in the company's gardens and, given that night falls late in the summer, the lights didn't start to sparkle until way after most children's usual bedtimes. I'm not the only one to be affected by the oddity of wintry traditions in warm climes. Every year my Capetonian friend Beatty shudders at the psychological confusion caused by local shopping malls ringing to the sounds of 'I'm dreaming of a white Christmas' and 'See amid the winter snow'.

Last month, at the Cape Town World Cinema Festival, we were given a version of the Christmas story and beyond far closer to home. *Son of Man*, the latest offering from the director of the

UCarmen eKhayelitsha (Carmen of Khayelitsha), moves the events to one of the poorest areas of Africa's richest economy, where Mary is a domestic worker, Jesus a township prophet and both angels (entrancing and pragmatic children) and the devil are never far away. This interpretation moved me in a way that I've never previously experienced with the Jesus story. Largely because it felt so close to my daily experience.

I now work in what *Son of Man* portrays as Jesus's manor. Khayelitsha ('Our new home' in Xhosa) is Cape Town's biggest informal settlement/township/disadvantaged community, call it what you will; its edges are seen along the N2 motorway as travellers whisk from the airport to the more salubrious comfort of the city. Unemployment, poverty, poor housing and lack of basic services lead to malnutrition and poor health here, where women and children are most vulnerable. Twenty per cent of the population is made up of children younger than six years old, one in every ten children is underweight for age and one out of every four is stunted. Half of the adult population is unemployed, disempowerment, frustration and violence (commonly against women) are rife. HIV/AIDS has hit these communities especially hard, with women bearing the brunt of the pandemic and

women HIV+. You can see why someone like Jesus would find plenty to do here.

Yet it's Mary who is hard at work, as she has been for nearly thirty years. Every day the community health care workers of Philani Child Health and Nutrition Project, all mothers living in the area, go out and work with the effects of Khayelitsha's problems, identifying and aiming to rehabilitate malnourished children, helping their mothers – often sick themselves – and empowering them to help themselves and their families. More than 2,500 people are being assisted at any one time. Every day I hear terrible stories, sometimes I see the facts for myself, last week I was reduced to tears by the appalling situation one of my colleagues faced in a home racked by disease, fear, poverty and ignorance. But the details of such stories are not easy to hear, particularly at Christmas. And the joy of Philani's work is that we also see so many positive outcomes.

This year I'm struggling to feel Christmassy in the holly and ivy, mince pies, ding dong bells, twinkly stars sense, but I have a feeling that if Christmas is about remembering a mother-child miracle, I'm fortunate to see it every day in Khayelitsha. You can read more about Philani's work at www.philani.org.za