

overheard at the extra-curricula café

Nativity – the nice and the nasty.

Cappuccino: You look a little flustered. Is everything all right?

Latté: It never ceases to amaze me: the variety of jobs a headteacher has to do.

Cappuccino: What? You've finally been persuaded to sweep the playground?

Latté: Oh, no. We have a machine for that. No. I had to take a pupil home.

Cappuccino: Why didn't you send for the parent?

Latté: It's a long story, but basically there isn't a parent.

Cappuccino: Ah. A complex home life?

Latté: Yes.

Cappuccino: So, taking a pupil home is no big deal, surely?

Latté: It's just the reminder of the environment that some students live in. There was an abandoned settee in the front garden, an enormous dog barking at me from behind a fence which looked as it would collapse any minute, and once the front door was opened, a smell which knocked me back two steps.

Cappuccino: I see. But surely you've been in that kind of environment many times before?

Latté: Yes, I suppose so, though in recent years I've usually got someone else to do it. You forget.

Cappuccino: We spend so much of our time sorting ourselves into like-minded communities, creating comfort zones for ourselves, that we forget there are other worlds out there.

Latté: It's true that location is so very significant.

Cappuccino: People will always sort themselves into categories, and pay a lot of money for it. A nice area, a quiet tree-lined neighbourhood, a good school catchment area.

Latté: We all want to live somewhere where we are comfortable. Talking of which, I was visiting an elderly aunt in a care home the other week.

Cappuccino: You might need one yourself one day.

Latté: My aunt was asleep much of the time, and I got talking to a little old lady sitting nearby.

Cappuccino: How delightful. What did you talk about? Knitting patterns and strawberry jam?

Latté: That's just it. She didn't fit the stereotype.

Cappuccino: Oh?

Latté: She was complaining about the meals. She said they were – well she used a word you are more likely to find written up in the boys' toilets.

Cappuccino: So that's two brushes with reality then. An untidy front a garden and colourful language.

Latté: In school we don't allow swearing and we keep the place reasonably tidy, which is very different from many pupils' everyday lives. I sometimes wonder if we do enough to prepare pupils for the more repulsive aspects of life?

Cappuccino: Well, you have the nativity to look forward to. That's all very pleasant, little barefoot angels, shepherds in nice clean tea towels. And the parental audience will love it. The ooh and aah factor never fails.

Latté: That's exactly my problem. We have gentrified it. The biblical story is just not like that. It's about teenage pregnancy, disapproving neighbours, a brutally oppressed and occupied country. It's about heavenly messengers who, let's face it, must have been terrifying. It's about shepherds, who were virtually outcasts, the lowest of the low. It's about eastern mystics whose religion probably involved the occult.

Cappuccino: And into that world God introduced His Son. Vulnerable, weak and helpless. If that's not moving out of your comfort zone, I don't know what is.

Latté: I've had a brilliant idea.

Cappuccino: Time to go, I think.

Latté: No, wait a moment. I'll talk to my staff and see if we can come up with a more realistic nativity play, portraying it like it was, not what gentrification has made it.

Cappuccino: No little infants with white frocks and aluminium foil wings? The parents won't like it.

Latté: I don't care. If I can move out of my comfort zone, so can they.

Cappuccino: This I cannot wait to see. And next morning the queue of angry parents at your door complaining at your disruption of centuries of tradition.

Latté: Maybe it's time that we teachers told it like it is, not like how people think it ought to be. Now I must leave this comfort zone and get back to work. ■