



CNI



Broadchurch stars Olivia Colman, David Tennant and Julie Hesmondhalgh. The gripping drama captured the nation and includes a surprising Christian presence.

PRESS WATCH - The surprising theology of Broadchurch: What we learn from its final sermon

This week saw the final episode of the 'final chapter' of ITV's thrilling crime drama *Broadchurch*, Joseph Hartropp writes in Christian Today.

The show's final moments saw a packed church and a poignant quote from the Bible, concluding a story that has wrestled with profoundly Christian ideas.

Broadchurch is a vastly popular 'whodunnit' crime-thriller set in a fictional Dorset town, Broadchurch. This third season has ambitiously but thoughtfully – and successfully – dealt with the trauma of rape.

After a tense season that kept audiences guessing and despairing at the horrors brought to light, the Broadchurch story came to a shocking conclusion last night – which we won't spoil here.

In the closing epilogue though, just about all of the cast gathered for a service at the local church, St Bede's. There the town's Christian presence Rev Paul Coates (played by Arthur Darvill) gave his final sermon.

In the brief words we hear he says: 'There's a line from Hebrews echoing through my head: "Let us all consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Not giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another..."



Broadchurch's Christian presence Rev Paul Coates, played by Arthur Darvill.

'Now I hope that even without me here you will go on encouraging one another. All any of us really want are love and good deeds.'

What should we make of this closing homily? It's not an explicitly evangelical inclusion, and a cynic might say it merely promotes a watered-down Christianity, effectively saying 'be nice to each other'.

It is true that the quote just clips off the more dramatic, eschatological end to the Hebrews verse: 'encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching' (Hebrews 10:25), referring to the return of Jesus to judge the earth.

Nonetheless, it would be foolish to waste time critiquing the biblical exegesis of a TV vicar, when the more interesting fact is that the Bible and the church play a notable role in the close of a show that doesn't have a Christian agenda, but is replete with some thoroughly theological threads.

Throughout *Broadchurch*, Coates has been progressively lamenting the waning attendance at his church. It brought a traumatised community together in season one, but now Coates finds his church empty, and his offers of counsel for the town are frequently rejected. Many tell him they have no interest in 'religion', though he only wants to be a pastoral listening ear. That awkward British discomfort with religion is something many ministers today will be familiar with. The show presents a pastor struggling to see the relevance of his vocation in a world seemingly indifferent to his message.

Coates has finally decided to move on from Broadchurch, but in highlighting the call to 'not give up meeting together', he implores the community to something he sees as vital for its flourishing.



In the small town of Broadchurch, anyone could be guilty.

To its credit, the small town of Broadchurch does have a somewhat hilarious habit of meeting together. Everyone made it to the ill-fated birthday party where season three began, and a mid-season friendly football match saw all the key suspects helpfully gather on the beach while detectives Hardy and Miller unsubtly scouted for the guilty. The Broadchurch Whatsapp group must be a nightmare, but it gets fantastic results.

When the community gathers for one final time at the church, it's a hopeful vision of how a Christian meeting place can provide solace and direction for a wounded, divided community.

Coates, revealed to be a recovering alcoholic in season one, has been a flawed but faithful pillar of the community, a positive emblem of Christian servanthood. He's not a wet, moralistic Ned Flanders nor the Vicar of Dibley's comedy cleric

Geraldine Granger. He's far more human, and that kind of thoughtful depiction is something Christians should be grateful for.

His presence provides an appropriate question mark of conscience to the show's surrounding characters. Like the Church in post-Christian Britain, Coates often feels ignored. But for the audience, he and what he stands for endures to the end.

This is because while Broadchurch's priest feels sidelined, the moral themes of good, evil, truth and depravity are central to the story. While some today protest a relativistic 'post-truth society', *Broadchurch's* lead detectives – and the audience at home – are constantly fighting to find 'the truth'. There's a desperate crusade to find the guilty, protect the innocent, and ensure that justice is served.

That said, there aren't many 'innocent' people in the show. On the way to finding the guilty perpetrator, we see that there are many in Broadchurch with skeletons in their cupboard. Police officers cross the line and stray into corruption. Those who look 'evil' may not be so, and those considered 'good' contemplate murder.

Even the guilty are understood as victims of sorts – caught in tragic circumstances, dealing out abuse once dealt to them. No excuses are made, but the ground is levelled – in Broadchurch, no one is perfect. Indeed, the premise of this crime thriller is just that pervasive depravity: 'anyone could have done it'.

When this darkness is veiled in the idyllic scenery of a Dorset seaside, we get a fascinating image. Behind this postcard-picture town – a supposed haven of peace and tranquility – there are many hiding deep darkness. It's something Christian theology is well acquainted with: we can put up a pretty façade, but we've all got something to hide. We're capable of great good and nobility, but also great sin and depravity.

It's a testament to the artistry of the show (by creator Chris Chibnall, whose next project is running the BBC's *Doctor Who*) that it's held onto its ideals of hope, truth and goodness while hon