

# Cotton Patch Gospel (1988)

Not Rated. Running time: 1 hour 51 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 1; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 0.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*This is an updated review that I wrote for the Feb. 1992 issue of Visual Parables. I am posting it because the life of Jesus has been so much before us of late with the airing of The Killing of Jesus and A.D. The Bible Continues. I want more people to become aware of this little known but wonderful DVD.*

As a long time fan of Harry Chapin's music, I was delighted to hear that he was working on a musical version of the life of Christ. News of his death was a double blow, since he had not finished the project when he was killed. Fortunately for all of us, his colleagues completed and mounted it for production in New York. Now we can all see Tom Key's fabulous performance as Jesus – and a disciple, and a Pharisee, and Pilate, and ...

This one-man show backed up by an incredible four-man country band, acting also as the crowd in some scenes and Greek chorus in others, is an inspiring taped version of the play.

In case you may not know about this work, the text is based on Clarence Jordan's Southern fried translation of two of the gospels, *The Cotton Patch Gospels of Matthew and John*. Bethlehem becomes Gainesville, Georgia, Nazareth Valdosta, and Jerusalem Atlanta. There is almost as much humor in this witty tale as there is in *Godspell*, thanks to translating the Greek into Southernese rather than standard English. Some examples:

The Temptations are seen by Jesus as a set of tests, so afterwards he says, "I passed." The angels minister to him with a sack of chili cheese dogs for him."

When the Devil tries to get the hungry Jesus to turn stones into bread, Jesus replies, "Men don't live by grits alone."

As in that musical, viewers are called upon to use their imaginations. Thanks to actor/singer Tom Key's great talent, this is not such a difficult task, the various personages engaged by Jesus—friends and foes—parading before us as we move from Galilee to Jerusalem. Tom Key is funny at one moment and so serious the next that you want to hold your breath so as not to miss a syllable.

Being set in the South, the "Good Samaritan" in Christ's parable from Luke becomes the Good Negro, and the Jewish priest a preacher. Back in the Sixties when Greek scholar Clarence Jordan was also the activist head of the interracial Koinonia Community outside Americus, Georgia, this retelling of the parable had quite a bite to it. (And the racist community surrounding Koinonia bit back, with gunfire, arson, and an economic boycott intended to starve out the residents.) The scene before Pilate (in which he plays both persons) is very moving, as is, of course, the lynching outside of Atlanta.

The music is tuneful, infectiously leading you to tap your toe and hum along. The song "Turn It Around," captures the heart of Jesus' ethical teaching of loving enemies by turning the other cheek and surprising them. *Cotton Patch* would be fun for a church or youth group to see as part of a Lenten or summer series of films on the life of Christ. I have been having an intriguing time this winter studying the commercial versions, from an early 1950's release called *Day of Triumph to Jesus of Montreal* as part of my doctor of ministry study of "Images of Christ in Art and Film." I have found twelve, all available on Videocassette, except for *Godspell* and possibly *The Day Christ Died*. Some of these are pretty awful (Johnny Cash's *Gospel Road*), some excellent (*Jesus of Nazareth* and *Jesus of Montreal* but none are more moving, even with their "casts of thousands," than this five-man production.

*For a great deal of information about the production, as well as the lyrics to "Turn It Around," see the site dedicated to it "The Cotton Patch Gospel: The Greatest Story Ever Retold" at <http://www.lorencollins.net/cottonpatchgospel/index.html>.*