

## THE PASSION AS MYSTERY DRAMA

Radio 4 Lent Talk 2015

Five years ago, I started to write a series of detective novels with the provisional title *The Grantchester Mysteries*. The stories begin in an English village in 1953 - when the death penalty was still extant, homosexuality was illegal, and human relationships were probably conducted in a more private manner than they are in our contemporary world of relentless self-disclosure.

What I wanted to do was to tell a tale of post-war Britain using the mystery story as a framework. It was to be an account of social and ethical change – with murder, theft, betrayal and injustice.

Crime writing is helpful for this. It gives the author the opportunity to put characters under extreme pressure and see how they react to the constant threat of death and disaster.

The precariousness of the human condition, the awareness of time and mortality, and the ability to react to abrupt shifts in fortune, whether good or bad, are paramount.

They would be morality tales, parables even, aiming for the economy of storytelling found in the Bible; meditations on the sin and suffering that underpin religious thinking, particularly in Lent.

When I began to plan the stories, I realised that the central character could easily have been a doctor or a teacher but I chose a priest. I wanted someone with easy access to personal secrets; present at key moments of birth,

marriage and death; someone who also had sufficient freedom of movement to go where the police could not.

I also wanted religion to be taken seriously as a subject. I hoped to escape the sit com clichés of *All Gas and Gaiters* and *Bless me Father* and to have, as the main character, a questioning, thoughtful Church of England vicar - rather than the kind once played by Derek Nimmo, Dick Emery or Rowan Atkinson in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.

That didn't mean comedy would not have its place, but it would be a world in which the comic and the tragic, the profound and the trivial could exist side by side.

This genre of writing is often belittled as "cosy crime" - historically these are stories in which one doesn't need to worry too much about the graphic depiction of the violence found in "hardboiled" alternatives - and, indeed, in the Bible.

"Cosy crime" is not a term I like very much. One has to remember that under the cosy, the pot may be scalding and the tea poisoned. Violence, and the consequences of crime, cannot be ignored so easily.

Having decided on the fictional character - Canon Sidney Chambers - and a real setting - the village of Grantchester, just outside Cambridge - one of the most vital things I had to do was to find a tone with which the reader could trust and feel at home.

One way of doing this is to see how others have done it before. I am not a great believer in creative writing courses, thinking that the best authors are often, simply, the closest readers, and so I looked to the past, particularly to novels that featured clergymen or people of faith - the work of Trollope, Dostoevsky, Dorothy L Sayers and G.K Chesterton.

In all of them there is a natural authority. Even if the writer claims to be mystified by the events that are being revealed, the authorial voice dominates the material. Clarity and confidence matter.

There was then the small matter of plot.

In 1929 Ronald Knox, a Catholic priest and author of *The Viaduct Murder*, *The Body in the Silo* and *Still Dead*, advised that a detective story "must have as its main interest the unravelling of a mystery; a mystery whose elements are clearly presented to the reader at an early stage in the proceedings, and whose nature is such as to arouse *curiosity*, a curiosity which is gratified at the end."

He came up with what he called "The Ten Commandments" of writing a detective story. Here are just five of them:

The criminal must be mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to know.

The detective himself must not commit the crime.

Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.

Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

and bizarrely,

No Chinaman must figure in the story.

While taking heed of some of his advice (twins *are* a definite no-no - far too obvious) I also turned back to a much earlier form of mystery drama for inspiration; the religious plays of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The English Mystery Cycles were popular broad-brush representations of key Biblical scenes, told by the people and for the people. Performed in English rather than Latin, these dramatic representations were taken out of the churches and into the streets. They were staged in tents and carts and on makeshift stages for promenade performances in town centres and around cathedrals. Often taking place on the feast of Corpus Christi, between late May and early June, they featured a series of short scenes, from the Creation of the World until Doomsday, involving speech, dialogue, music, dancing, special effects and even wrestling. Four complete series of these plays - what would today be called "the DVD boxed sets" - survive; from Chester, Towneley, York and Coventry.

As in the contemporary mystery drama, the focus is on human fallibility. Whether it be temptation, fear or pure evil, crime is never far away. Take Cain's murder of Abel, Lamech's killing of Cain, Abraham's near miss with Isaac, or Herod's Massacre of the Innocents. The stories chosen mixed murder with morality, so by the time the narrative reached the Passion of Christ, audiences were well attuned to a multi-genre mixture of tension, mystery and revelation.

The structure of these stories has an archetypal timelessness; so much so that looking at the Easter story through the prism of mystery drama, it is extraordinary how clearly Biblical events follow the methodology of a contemporary thriller.

Imagine it on film. A close up of a bare and twisted tree. A wide shot of the hot and dusty road to Jerusalem. High sun, baked earth. It's a bit like a western. In the distance we see twelve men, a gang of insurgents, with their

charismatic leader, tired and struggling. They've been on the road a long time. The camera lingers on one of the men. We think it might be Jesus but it's not. It is Judas, an early version of the police informer.

Before they enter Jerusalem the characters make camp and tell each other a series of stories so the audience can get to know them. There are a few minor crimes and petty thefts: the stealing of an ass - and a colt; the wanton destruction of a fig tree. On reaching the city there's a bit of a scuffle with the scribes, pharisees and hypocrites. The gang approach the temple and attack the money changers. It's like a heist movie except there's a twist. The gang don't take the loot.

What are they after? Something bigger, more political, religious- something that no one can understand. It's a mystery.

Jesus warns that the Temple will be destroyed within three days. This institutes the ticking-clock scenario, the race against time – when, how and why will the Temple be destroyed – or can it be saved?

You've got three days.

The story now switches to focus on the panic amongst the city's religious and business leaders. This is the threatened establishment. They have to move fast to protect their own interests. They meet up to discuss ways in which they can restore order and get rid of the trouble-makers; either legally or illegally.

This initiates the murder plot.

They decide to infiltrate the gang. They find Judas. He's the mole, the snitch, the rat: paid with blood money to let the forces of law and order know when and where Jesus can be kidnapped.

Jesus calls his supporters together, and, in the kind of upper room of a restaurant where a group of Mafiosi might meet, he tells his people of a conspiracy theory.

His behaviour is unsettling. He talks enigmatically. He has had visions. He is, perhaps, a little paranoid - convinced that his best-loved disciple will abandon him.

The next scene ratchets up the tension and takes place, as in all good *film noir*, at night. Christ is alone and unguarded in a remote location that's hard to protect. A garden. A group of vigilantes arrive, together with the chief priests and the elders of the Temple. Judas is in their midst. The camera stays on him for the kiss of betrayal, we cut to Jesus's reaction, and he is led away. A reaction shot shows the disciples left in disarray in the dark.

Under unofficial arrest, Jesus endures a mock trial in which he is "fitted up" by two false witnesses. He is accused of blasphemy and beaten up.

Now there's a switch of genre. The story becomes a traditional court-room drama. Pontius Pilate washes his hands of the whole event, submits to popular pressure, organizes an exchange of prisoners, and issues the death sentence. In the words of Matthew's Gospel "See ye to it."

We then cut to a Tarantino-style blood-bath finale. In prison, Christ is beaten up and tortured. There is no last minute reprieve. He is crucified. Two thieves die with him. Judas hangs himself. The veil of the Temple is torn in two. We see the face of Christ. Rain. Cut back wide. Lightning. Fade to Black. Credits.

It's all over.

Except that it isn't.

Like all good mystery drama there has to be a final reel, an Act 5, a twist – and in the drama of the Passion there are three:

**Twist One:** *The Body Disappears.* In this ultimate version of a “locked-room mystery” Jesus, who is, officially dead, manages to escape from a sealed tomb that’s guarded by soldiers 24 hours a day. How has he done this?

**Twist Two:** *The revelation of the Murderer.* In all the night-time confusion of the drama the viewer is left wondering who is ultimately responsible for Christ’s death; is it Caiaphas, Herod, Judas, Pontius Pilate, or the soldiers who nailed him to the cross? Could any of these suspects admit their guilt or become the solution to the mystery?

Well, it turns out *none* of them can claim responsibility because all of these actions were plotted by an over-arching mastermind who has been behind the whole thing all along. That mastermind is, of course, God.

This is the plain and shocking truth of the Passion.

God is the murderer of Jesus. He may not have physically nailed his Son to the cross, but death was inevitable.

“For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

This leads to

**Twist Three:** *It’s not death, but life.*

The final twist is one of transformation. The mystery genre is subverted. Through the Resurrection we have a happy ending; tragedy is transformed

into what, in its broadest sense, we can call a comedy, the happy ending that is the salvation of mankind.

In St Paul's words: "Behold, I shew you *a mystery*. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."

Whereas crime drama often depends on the resolution of the narrative - with all the loose ends being tied up - this is not a locked room mystery such as John Dickson Carr's *The Hollow Man*, or a thriller such as Agatha Christie's *And Then there were None* (in which the murderer is a victim who comes back to life), nor has the whole thing been planned by a benevolent version of Sherlock Holmes's nemesis Moriarty - this a tale of redemption that throws its final responsibility back on to the reader.

For this is not just a story of what happens to other people. It is about what happens to us once we have become, through the simple act of reading and being mortal, an accessory to the crime.

**We** shall be changed.

The reader of the gospels, like the audience at the mystery plays, becomes *part* of the narrative – left to decide if this experience is fiction or, in fact, true reality.

Can *you* - believe it?

Whatever we end up deciding - whether we appreciate the story of the passion as divine revelation or simply as poetry or metaphor - it is the archetypal presentation of the ultimate "mystery drama": the mystery of what it means to be alive.