

## Easter Day, 2018.

### A sermon preached at St Thomas-on-The Bourne.

I offer you a list: Salvo Montalbano, Guido Brunetti, Simon Serailier, Roy Grace, Adam Dalgleish, V. I. Warshawski.

And if I ask you what they have in common, the answer, you already know, is that they are all detectives. Montalbano and Brunetti ply their trade in Italy, Simon Serailier, Roy Grace and Adam Dalgleish are based in England, and V I Warshawski works in Chicago.

But there is a difference between them as well. All the detectives are men, except for V I Warshawski who is a courageous, no-nonsense woman. She lives on her own in a fairly chaotic flat in a part of Chicago which has seen better times. She has an elderly neighbour, Mr Contreras, who has a couple of dogs which V I takes for regular runs along the shore of Lake Michigan and he, as a kind of surrogate grandfather, spends much of his time worrying about the dangers into which V I gets herself. By the way, 'V I' stands for Victoria Iphigenia but she is known always as V. I. She is half Jewish, half Polish, had an Italian Jewish mother and a Polish policeman father, but V I herself is not a police detective. She is a Private Investigator. If you read the books in which she is the hero (they are written by Sara Paretsky) you can get the feel of Chicago...the gangs, the elevated train-track known as the L, the poorest and the richest districts, the wind blowing in from the Lake, the huge sky-scrapers, the ice-hockey teams, the scrap yards and derelict, rusting, factories.

Well. I love V I. She is a feisty, intelligent woman who is prepared to fight everyone who stands in the way of her achieving justice for the victims of crime...and frequently gets hurt herself both physically and psychologically in the process. Her love-life, as you might imagine, is not straightforward.

One of the delights of this sort of fiction is that it inhabits an entirely moral universe. There is 'good' (represented by the detective) and there is 'bad', represented by the criminals. But it is also delightful because the plots always resolve...the detective always gets a proper, full and unambiguous result. Villains are arrested, the detective is vindicated and we can all sleep easily in our beds. And we can close the book with a sense of satisfaction and completion.

Transfer the idea of resolution in Detective novels to the ending of the Four Gospels. There are similarities: there is a moment in the Gospels when everything is sorted out. The Christ who was dead is now alive again, and the disciples find that their grief has turned to joy...but it's not quite as straightforward or as complete as that. Some elusiveness remains: Mary Magdalene does not at first recognise the Risen Jesus; the disciples on the road to Emmaus don't recognise Jesus either; the 11 disciples, especially Thomas, still doubt and even the upbeat ending of Matthew's gospel has equivocation built in: "*Then the eleven*

*disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted”*

And Mark's Gospel offers us the most elusive ending of all: *So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

Why is there no completion, no comprehensive resolution?

Let me try an answer.

If you had been here at St Thomas' just over one week ago you would have heard a concert given by Rob Lewis' Chamber Choir, *Vox*. The music soared, the readings were perfect, and the guest cellist produced sounds which were heavenly. At the end of the concert there was a moment of silence before applause erupted. The whole event had been beautiful. We had been taken to the threshold of wonder. It was a place where words were inadequate.

Try walking after this service to the Old Churchyard. The Spring flowers are bursting through the ground with prodigal and divine subtlety; again, too beautiful for words.

Or try looking at the first smile of a baby...or a mother holding her new-born. Words fail but Joy sings.

Or, read a poem where the words are so carefully chosen, each word pulling its own weight, and ironically, the beauty of the poem will be beyond words.

So, music, flowers, a baby's smile, a poem...all of them seem to vibrate with a beauty which is not just the product of chance or human skill, but they resonate with something else, a truth whose source is beyond our comprehension.

For me, the Resurrection of Christ falls into that same category, or perhaps more accurately, all these human experiences fall into the category of Resurrection...so, of course, words fail, and of course, elusiveness is built-in. It has to be. The Gospel writers were correct not to try to tie-up all the loose ends. They couldn't. Elusiveness is of the essence of beauty.

Unlike detective novels where resolution happens and completion is achieved, in great music, in great poetry, in the energy of nature, in human delight, and in the Resurrection of Christ, completion is beyond words.

Which is why, when we encounter the Resurrection of Christ, we find, like the characters in the Gospel stories, that we fail to fully understand its implications. Perhaps the Resurrection is an event which we can only begin to understand by entering into it and by allowing its grace and beauty to take root in the depths of our souls... and then we have to wait with patient love for its truths to shape our futures.

The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert.