

Last Monday morning I decided to stop being a vicar.

Instead I followed my dreams

and became Chief Inspector Morse

and sidekick Sergeant Lewis

all rolled into one.

It was a murder investigation

with evidence from four witnesses already recorded

in documentary form.

What made it different from all the other murders

usually investigated by our trio

was that

- a. This murder took place 2000 years ago.
- b. The crime was committed in Israel rather than Oxford.
- c. The witnesses not only record the murder,  
but also the murder victims coming back to life.

In the sundry episodes I have watched on ITV,

Morse had investigated a murder

that had been committed in Victorian times,

and also a murder committed in Australia,

so time and distance away from Oxford were no problem.

But a murder victim risen from the dead

presented a considerable challenge, uncharted territory.

Nevertheless I thought it would be fun to put Morse on the case.

The case's name: Murder reversed.

As to the identity of the murderer/murderers,

we'll leave for another time.

This time, this Easter-time

Morse is more concerned about the situations

where the corpse pops up,

and whether those situations can be replicated now

in a sort of celestial crime/miracle reconstruction.

First the four witnesses:

all men,

or at least bearing the names of men,

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Their good character has been vouched for

by twenty centuries of popes, archbishops, kings, politicians

right down to Cliff Richard in the present day.

In fact their witness is so reliable

that anybody giving evidence in any trial in any court

in the United Kingdom

puts Matthew, Mark, Luke and John's witness statements

in their right hand

and promises to be as truthful as they have been.

Having said that,

their testimony is

confused, garbled,

often hearsay at third or fourth hand.

Our four witnesses themselves cite other witnesses,

more than a couple of dozen,

some named in detail,

other names are vague or not mentioned at all.

Their evidence bears the mark of a witness

who is excited about their discovery,

an Archimedes shouting eureka

stating the obvious rather than needing

to take people through the stages.

As for the crime/miracle scene,

we have several.

All four witnesses focus on the tomb,

but in different ways.

All agree that the tomb was empty,

the body had gone.

All agree that angels were present,

in Matthew, Mark and Luke  
the angels speak of resurrection  
as if the point should be obvious.

Matthew has the murdered man  
encountering the women  
as they run away from the tomb.

John has the murdered man  
encountering Mary Magdala  
at the tomb itself,  
he calls her Mary,  
she calls him Rabboni.

In their different ways,  
all four witnesses are saying  
that something happened at the tomb,  
may be flagging up the possibility that something happens  
at every tomb,

at every place of crushing grief  
this ultimate murder victim is somehow present,  
marvellously and miraculously present.

Matthew and Luke also have him present  
on the mountain top,  
two different mountain tops:

Luke at Bethany,  
Matthew at Galilee.

Go to the mountain top and expect to be surprised.

All four have appearances in the Holy City of Jerusalem:  
if you want to find him,  
go to holy cities,  
holy places,  
sites where faith has been valid for centuries.

This morning we heard of the murder victim  
popping up in several sites,  
several situations.

Two men out on a walk,  
a longish seven mile walk.

Bishop Tim Stevens,  
who walked through his diocese of Leicester during Lent,  
writes,

‘Walking slows us down,  
gives us time to reflect and have conversations.’

As they walk these two men  
are struggling with the Scriptures,  
desperate to try and make sense of them  
and the murder they witnessed,  
the murder they did nothing to stop.

As they walk they are joined by a third man,  
a stranger,

who pulls no punches  
in telling them they are foolish  
and dim-witted.

Not only do they take the criticism,  
but they are worried for the stranger:  
‘Stay with us, it’s getting late, getting dangerous.’

Then as the stranger breaks the bread,  
they recognise him.

Walking,  
scripture-talking,  
taking insults,  
expressing concern,  
sharing a meal.

Five scenes of crime,  
five scenes of miracle that we can replicate.

When they realise the stupendity of what has happened,

the two men run the seven miles back to Jerusalem,  
and find their evidence corroborated.

The murder victim appears again  
to another group struggling with the Scriptures,  
and eats a fish supper with them,  
even in one version finishing off the meal  
with a honeycomb,  
a sort of precursor for Crunchie,  
leaving his teethmarks therein.

Clearly no ghost,  
but flesh and blood.

Yet flesh and blood which twice  
walks through locked doors  
and has a habit of vanishing from people's site  
as soon as the penny drops.

'Such a fast God,  
always before us and leaving as we arrive,'

Morse growls.

'Who wrote that then, sir,' Lewis asks.

'R S Thomas,'

Morse replies.

'Ah, of Under Milk Wood fame,' Lewis chirps.

'No that's Dylan rather than R S,'

is Morse's icy response.

There's also something about old haunts  
or harrowing haunts being revisited.

Twice the murdered man

appears in the Upper Room,

environs for the Last Supper,

with lamb and unleavened bread

and betrayals galore were on the menu.

Once he appears by the lakeside

when the disciples had returned to their familiar fishing

yet couldn't even catch fish

let alone men.

'Cast your nets once more,'

he orders,

precipitating a bumper catch.

He cooks breakfast for them on a charcoal fire.

The last time the charcoal fire had featured  
had been in the courtyard of the high priest.

Whilst his Lord shivered with fear,

Peter warmed his hands

and denied him three times.

Now by the lakeside charcoal fire,

the murdered man

three times asks Peter if he loves him,

and then commissions him

to be a charcoal fire for the world

and set it ablaze with his life.

One final crime scene.

There are thousands of ancient manuscripts

containing the texts of the four Gospel witnesses.

Just a few

have a Post Script

to John's story of the murdered man  
appearing by the lakeside.

The action returns to the very heart of Jerusalem,  
its temple,

with a woman in a state of undress

being dragged in and thrown before the shy Jesus.

'This woman is an adulteress, she should be stoned,'  
her accusers spit.

'What do you say, Rabboni?'

Jesus doodles in the temple dust before replying,

'Sure. But let the one amongst you who is without sin,

the one amongst you who has never looked  
at page 3 of the Sun,  
let him throw the first stone.’  
Cue accusers all exit,  
leaving just Jesus and the woman.  
‘Has no one condemned you?’ Jesus asks,  
managing to sound surprised.  
‘No one, Rabboni.’  
‘Neither do I condemn you  
Go, do not sin again.’  
The murdered man,  
popping up in a place of grace,  
totally underserved and unexpected mercy.  
‘It strikes me, sir, that this murdered man,  
Jesus is it you call him,  
has a habit of popping up anywhere.’

‘Maybe,’ replies Morse, ‘Maybe.  
or maybe these witnesses  
are giving us clues to ten particular places  
where we might find him.  
Read out the places from your note book, Lewis.’

1. Any tomb, any place of grief and deadness.
2. Any mountain top
3. Any holy city or holy place.
4. Any walk
5. Any place of insult.
6. Any place where we express concern.
7. Any meal, be that bread or fish  
– eh, maybe that could be alluding to a symbolic meal, sir,  
such as the Eucharist.

‘Stick to the facts, Lewis, carry on’

8. Any struggle with the Scriptures

- eh, could that be any writing, sir, like Shakespeare  
with his multi levels of meaning, or even that poet you  
were quoting, Dylan S Thomas?

‘Spare me the Oxford supervision, Lewis.’

9. Old haunts with haunts

with haunts being the operative word.

and finally

10. Places where instead of judgement

there is unexpected grace and mercy.

Uh, sounds like the judge has turned a bit soft to me, sir.

‘Be that as it may, Lewis,

mount a 24 hour surveillance on those ten spots,  
I need to have a word with him, we all do.’

‘But we haven’t got enough spare men, sir!’

‘Don’t give me that, Lewis,

conscript the whole world if you have to,  
get everyone looking in those places, 24/7.

My life depends on it.

Your life depends on it.

The whole world’s life depends on it.

Get everybody looking for him,

for his life,

for life in all its fullness.

And it’s RS Thomas, you idiot!