

Space in the City: Winchester, 18 January 2012.

Catching our attention: making decisions about priorities in life.

I should like to introduce you to a woman called Jenny Cooper. She is a forty-something divorced woman who lives mostly on her own in a small cottage called Melin Bach which you reach by driving one mile up a narrow lane on a wooded hillside near Tintern in the Wye Valley. The cottage is small and has stone-flagged floors and although a fire cheers things up, in rough weather the windows rattle alarmingly and the cottage creaks and groans. Jenny is a light sleeper. Her former husband is a heart- surgeon and they have one son called Ross who is in his late and moody teens. Sometimes Ross lives with his father and his father's new girlfriend in Bristol, and at other times he lives with his mother.

Jenny has recently made a major change in her career. She has switched from working as a legal advocate in the children's department of her local authority and has instead become the Coroner for the Severn Vale. She is determined to show that after her divorce her life has not fallen apart and she approaches her new work with a kind of grim and angry determination. As a result, she pushes herself to her psychological limits. She is fairly dependent on beta blockers and anti-depressants and swallows them with toxic abandon, but she is receiving psychiatric help from a warm-hearted psychiatrist in Chepstow. It is clear that there is something lurking deep in her psyche which relates to a traumatic episode in early childhood.

As a coroner it is her duty to investigate the "how" of sudden deaths and in doing so she finds herself sometimes drawn to the murky underworld of Bristol life. She is deeply concerned that justice shall be done, no matter what the consequences might be and, as a result, has troubled relationships with the local police and with the pathologists who carry out autopsies in the local hospital. If she so much as sniffs the merest hint of a cover-up she is on to it like a flash, determined to get to the truth.

I recognise that by now you might be beginning to wonder if I am breaking some serious pastoral confidences talking about Jenny Cooper in such a public way. Let me put you out of your misery. Jenny Cooper is not real, though everything that I have said about her is accurate. She is a character in a series of novels by M R Hall. The first of the novels called "The Coroner" is a really good yarn. I could not put it down, but whilst I have read the follow-up stories I am afraid that they did not catch my attention in the same way, partly because Jenny as a character is not very congenial. She is a deeply flawed person, and in that respect she follows the pattern of many other detective characters: think of Simon Serailier, Susan Hill's brilliant creation, an artist and detective who finds making relationships rather tortuous; or think of Adam Dalgleish in P D James' detective novels, or Dalziell in Reginald Hill's page-turning yarns or, darker and more flawed still, the characters in Stieg Larsson's tremendous but horrific novel "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo". It is almost a "must have" in detective fiction in the late 20th and early 21st century, that the great hero or heroine is psychologically vulnerable. There is one lovely exception, and that is the Venice-based detective, Commissario Guido Brunetti in the novels of Donna Leon, a man of gently cynical charm who is happily married to Paula, a lecturer in a nearby University. He and his wife and

children are gorgeous. You'd love to have them as your neighbours and to have a glass of cold Prosecco with them.

At which point you might well ask why I have begun this lecture about making decisions about priorities with a resumé of a few of my favourite detective novels. Well, it is because the genre is enlightening about attitudes in our own century towards decision making, and especially about decisions about personal choices.

Detective fiction inhabits a seriously moral secondary world. (And by "secondary world" I mean the world of literature in which there needs to be internal coherence, whereas the "primary world", in which there are more shades of grey, is the one we inhabit day-by-day.) In the secondary world of detective fiction there is a battle between good and evil, where good always triumphs in the end; there is a struggle between the detective hero and the corrupt villains; there is an existential struggle between the cool rationality of the detective and the absurdity and chaos of the crimes he or she is trying to solve – though, in principle, the crimes are open to rational investigation. At the surface of any detective story these are the compelling constituent elements. But look a little below the surface and there are some other things lurking. There is a mirroring relationship, for example, between the inner flaws and vulnerabilities of the detective and the outward chaos to which they attempt to bring a solution. Inner, personal fragmentation echoes the fragmentation of dismembered bodies in morgues...As a result, detective heroes struggle to make good choices about their own personal lives, and about their priorities. Will Jenny Cooper actually make the psychological breakthrough to enable her to gain some kind of inner peace? Will Susan Hill's Simon Serailier actually fall in love and marry, instead of brooding about his personal inadequacies and his intense loneliness?

As it is, at this deeper level, the inner discomfort and anguish of the detectives is channelled into the energy required to bring villains to justice and to discover the truth. The detectives could walk away, and Jenny Cooper frequently wishes to do so, but her conscience, her burning desire to get at the truth won't allow her to. But she is so engulfed by some of her inner anguish that her self-awareness becomes opaque. Her patient side-kick, Alison, says to her "Sometimes I think not even you knows what drives you" (The Redeemed, M. R. Hall: Pan Books: 2011.) like other detective heroes Jenny Cooper pays a heavy personal price for her obsessive intensity, her moral crusade, and in it are the seeds of tragedy. The choice she has made to uncover the truth, come what may, threatens to overwhelm her. Faced with this, what are the choices she should make? What should be her moral priorities? It reminds me of a concept which was put forward by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin about what he calls "Incommensurability". A situation is "incommensurable" when there is a clash not of good and evil, but a clash of two competing goods. In the case of Jenny Cooper, the two goods that are clashing are the desire to bring justice and order to the lives of others by solving terrible crimes, and the other good is her desire to be in a good relationship with her son and with a loving new partner. But it would seem that she cannot have both goods at once... Berlin describes this as the tragedy of the human condition and sees no way out. I shall return to this later.

But I'm going now to leave the world of detective fiction and move to another literary form – to travel writing. One of the few growth areas in publishing in the last decades of the 20th century was the travel writing, either of the witty, soft-focus and seductive “Toujours Provence” kind, or, more commonly, the solitary traveller, like Dervla Murphy, Wilfred Thesiger and Bruce Chatwin. They, like the detective heroes, place themselves in difficult and hostile terrain and try to give it some shape and coherence. And we, the readers, without stirring from the comfort of our arm-chairs can share vicariously in their exploits. One of the great writers at the beginning of this tradition was Robert Louis Stevenson. In 1879 he wrote “Travels with a donkey in the Cevennes”. The donkey, as you will know was called Modestine and the journey of about 120 miles took him 12 days. The journey had a great effect upon Robert Louis Stevenson himself and upon those who read his carefully constructed and composed account, including Richard Holmes the 20th century biographer of Shelley and Coleridge, amongst others. As an 18 year old in 1964, Holmes decided to follow in R L Stevenson's footsteps, but without a donkey. It was a journey in search of Stevenson but also a journey about writing “ I had started a travel diary, teaching myself to write, and trying to find out what was happening to me, what I was feeling”. All very 1960's, but in his reprise of the 21 year old R L Stevenson's journey Holmes discovered a great deal not only about Stevenson but also about himself. There is a lovely description of an encounter with an old man, a shoemaker, who gives him a meal late one evening in his small cottage “sitting...under a print of Millet's “Angelus”, eating omelette and drinking red wine from a pitcher and laughing. I remember the old man's dungaree blues, his blue beret, his arthritic hands, still nimble and expressive on the red check table cloth...”You see”, said the old man, “there is a time to kick up your heels and see the world a bit. I was like that too. And now I make shoes. That's how things are. You will see”. (Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer: Richard Holmes: Hodder and Stoughton 1985)

He writes too, but with greater shyness, about his spiritual experiences: he is sleeping in the open air under some pine tress, “...once waking, I drank two ice-cold mouthfuls of water from my can and, leaning back, saw the Milky Way astonishingly bright through the pine tops, and felt something indescribable like falling upwards into someone's arms “ (ibid,pg 22).

There were other moments of insight, such as the occasion when he was in a town trying to imagine himself into the mind of R L Stevenson and, standing on a bridge which he believed was the one on which Stevenson had stood, he began almost to hallucinate, thinking that perhaps Stevenson was actually watching him. He tried to collect his thoughts and looking downstream saw the remains of a much older, broken bridge. The one on which he was standing was *not* the one on which Stevenson had stood. It was a sharp reminder to him that it was impossible to reach back completely into the past. “Even in imagination the gap was there...you could not play-act into the past, you could not turn it into a game of make-believe ...somehow you had to produce the living effect, while remaining true to the dead fact...I caught an inkling of what a process (indeed an entire vocation) biography was...for me, it was to become a kind of pursuit...a following of footsteps. You would never catch them; no, you would never quite catch them. But maybe, if you were lucky, you might write about the pursuit of that fleeing figure in such a way as to bring it alive in the present. “ (ibid. Pg 27).

It was a wistful epiphany.

As Holmes continued his journey he had other moments of revelation, such as the time when he realised that Stevenson was not just making a physical journey, he was making a metaphysical one: “Stevenson was making a pilgrimage into the recesses of his own heart. He was asking himself what kind of man he should be, what life-pattern he should follow” (ibid Pg 38). And, by implication, Holmes was doing the self-same thing—making choices about his desire to be a writer, learning the craft and disciplines of biography. It was a turning point in his own development.

Travel writing seems to have within it this strong element of epiphany; moments when questions about meaning and purpose force their attention upon the traveller. Here’s an example from a Portuguese writer, Jose Saramago: “When the traveller is far away, back in that great city he calls home and has had a hard day, he chooses to remember the lake with its watery arms penetrating the rocky valleys...he’ll see in his mind’s eye the flanks of pine trees reflected on that superlative surface and then within himself a sea of silence will form, out of which comes the murmur, as if responding in the only possible way “I am”. That nature should be capable of permitting so much to a mere traveller could only cause surprise in someone who has never been to the Canicada lagoon. The traveller has to tell it how it is: any passer-by who merely congratulates himself by simply mentioning “I was there” or “I took that route”, gets it wrong. Who could pass by without speaking the truth: I didn’t go to view it, I went to learn from it !” (Jose Saramoga: *Journey to Portugal*” Harvill Press 2000)

What I have been trying to do thus far, is to argue that in two kinds of writing, in Detective Fiction, and in Travel Writing, serious questions about human choices, and meaning and purpose are asked, and potential answers explored And implicitly I have been making the case that in order to understand ourselves better, in order to widen and deepen our self-understanding, reading such material can be enlightening. It’s that lovely phrase of Penelope Lively’s, “...reading is the liberation into the minds of others”

One of the other implicit themes which has run through both the genre of detective fiction and also of travel writing is the opacity of the material. Remember the metaphor of the broken bridge in Richard Holmes’ ponderings about biography, and the inherent confusion deep in the psyche of Jenny Cooper.(“Sometimes I think that not even you knows what drives you”). It would seem that there are limits to how much we can know of others, and limits to how much we can understand of ourselves. In such a pass, the making of choices that matter, the deciding on serious priorities is perhaps more mysterious and baffling a process than we might wish.

Not many of us have the clarity or certainty of the Damascus road...

And that leads me into the final section of this talk. You will be aware that I have said nothing that could not have been said by a humanist student of literature, but in a lecture on choice and priorities I cannot ignore another question, which is about the nature of our relationship with God. If there is no God, then the wisdom we have to draw on to make our

profound choices can only be found in our own human ponderings and not on anything beyond. In saying that I am not in any sense belittling that position, but for me as a believer in God, I cannot leave Him out of the equation. Vocation, “calling” is an important part of the Christian vocabulary.

Vocation, though, is not the beginning; it is part of the later stages...

Perhaps I can explain what I mean.

In the book of Genesis we find a statement about our relationship with God and his relationship with us which is foundational, axiomatic: “God created human beings in his own image; in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them...”(Genesis 1, v.27). In other words, there is an inherent and indestructible relationship between God and humanity. Our being is, as it were, derived from his Being.

I am not here to argue the historicity or otherwise of the creation stories in Genesis. But I am working on the assumption that Genesis is an attempt to describe in narrative form the theological and ontological relationship that exists between God and human kind.

If you accept that as a basic premise, then the concept of vocation follows: that God wants to be in a relationship with humanity that is inexhaustibly and richly creative, and has an element of demand and response built in to it. In Christian terms, the word “love” best summarises what we mean.

Certainly, in the Old Testament the idea of a relationship of demand and response between God and humanity runs through it like a golden thread. Think of the call of Abraham: “Leave your own country, your kin, and your father’s house, and go to a country that I shall show you. I will make you into a great nation.” (Genesis 12,v. 1); think of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac; think of the call of Moses... “You are to bring my people out of Israel” (Exodus 3,v.10); think of the call of David at the hands of the prophet Samuel: “Rise and anoint him”, said God to Samuel, “this is the man”. Think of all the prophets who spoke to the people because they felt that they had been called to do so...Move to the New Testament and think of the baptism of Jesus; bring to mind the stories of the call of the disciples; recall the way in which Jesus selected the 12; think of the stories of the resurrection appearances...calling is a *sine qua non* of the Christian story. And this raises questions about choice and priorities.

The Old and New Testaments are freighted with a view of humankind that sees human purpose in terms of God as Creator, God as Father, God as Love, and God as one who calls his people not only to be in a relationship with him, but to share in his eternal work of reconciliation. This feels like a very different view of the nature of choice and priorities from what we were considering earlier. If we pray “Thy will be done”, we are making a decision to subsume our own needs and hopes and longings beneath the over-arching purposes of God.

At which point I might close and rest my case and say something like “Choice and priorities in life are simply a matter of finding God’s will and doing it...” But I do not think that that will do. It’s the word “simply” which gives the game away. For two reasons, firstly, because our own human experience, if we are honest, may well have some similarities with the

fictional world of detective heroes such as Jenny Cooper. We each know what inner turmoil is and feels like. And I do not want to give the impression that there is a great divide between the Christian faith and the human-ness we share in common with everyone else.. Our faith is incarnated in our humanity, muddled, flawed and beautiful as it is. Secondly, because my own experience and the experience of countless other Christian people is that trying to discover God's will is not simple at all. How can I be certain that I am not mistaking the promptings of my own ego for God? How can I be certain that I am not deceiving myself? How can I, in truth, discern what God wants me to do? And might not "vocation" in the hands of unscrupulous people be a means of exercising unhealthy power? Further, is there really a hierarchy of vocation, in which some tasks are worthy of the name, and others, such as being a dustman, are not?

And now I am forced to speak a little personally. When I was a young man I certainly wanted to dedicate my life to Christ. It was a long and conscious decision, based partly on how I had been brought up, partly on thinking, partly on prayer and partly, no doubt, on emotional and aesthetic forms of comprehension which were not entirely clear to me at the time. I did feel a call, but trying to put that into words was very, very difficult. Fortunately, I was not left to cope with this on my own. A combination of people helped me to discern in what direction my life should go, but a part of me was very reluctant, very reluctant indeed. I think it is fair to say that at no point in my life have I felt completely and absolutely certain about how I could best try to serve God in Christ. I did not have, and have never had a Damascus Road experience. But...but...I have never doubted either the rock-like quality of God. All that I have tried to do is to offer myself to God on a daily basis and see what happens...For most of my life that meant being in a full-time ordained capacity in the Church of England, as deacon, priest and Bishop. Now that I am retired, I continue to offer my life daily to God...and see what happens. Certainly I am more conscious than ever of my vocation being part of a much, much bigger tapestry of which I can only see the tiniest fraction...

In brief, I simply wait and trust...but that is partly a gift and consequence of the ageing process.

But I shall end with a quotation from one of the M R Hall books in which a liberal-minded Muslim lecturer at Bristol University is pondering about the nature of religious fundamentalism: "but the fundamentalists do have a point", he said, "Without a story to explain ourselves we are nothing".(M R Hall: *The Disappeared*: Pan Books 2010). It's a neat phrase which seems to me to capture what is most challenging about much of contemporary society. There is no longer *one* story; instead there is a cacophony of stories. And part of our thinking about priorities and choices depends on our gifts as narrators of our own stories, and how we discern and regard the authenticity of the stories of others and also on whether we see ourselves as part of a much bigger, over-arching story – the story of God's relationship with us in Christ.

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