



## AGATHA CHRISTIE

# THE GREATEST MYSTERY OF ALL

Cholsey resident Agatha Christie is the acknowledged queen of mystery and whodunits. Her work has been, and continues to be, quite staggeringly popular. Why are so many of us fascinated by her stories and her life? Some of the appeal must derive from the simple fact that death is universal, and so is the deep-seated unease that murder creates. Then there is also the love of puzzles that have solutions, even, or maybe, especially when we have to work hard to find those solutions.

Agatha Christie was a regular worshipper at St Mary's Cholsey during the latter years of her life, and she and her husband, Sir Max Mallowan, are both buried in its churchyard. If you are a fan of Agatha Christie, you almost certainly like a good mystery. But what is it that makes a good mystery so satisfying to our souls?

W H Auden, a self-confessed addict of detective fiction, argued in a brief but influential essay, "The Guilty Vicarage" that a detective story "must appear to be an innocent society in a state of grace, i.e., a society where there is no need of the law... and where murder, therefore, is the unheard-of act which precipitates a crisis (for it reveals that some member has fallen and is no longer in a state of grace). The law becomes a reality and for a time all must live in its shadow, till the fallen one is identified. With his arrest, innocence is restored, and the law retires forever...The phantasy, then, which the detective story addict indulges is the phantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence, where he may know love as love and not as the law."

Yes, we have to go back to that old story about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. You may think of it as just that, an old story. but sometimes the old stories are the best! Adam and Eve are in an amazing place, enjoying the good creation all around them, all their needs met, at peace with each other and themselves, finding fulfilment in the job given them, to look after the earth - a big enough task in anyone's book! And they are also at peace with God, who meets them evening by evening in the cool of the day.

Too good to be true? Well, someone - here described as the serpent - certainly thought so. He cleverly put questions to Eve about her situation, led her to feel curious about the mysterious tree in the middle of the garden the fruit of which they were not to eat, and offered her a new experience, that of knowing good and evil. So far, Adam and Eve had only experienced good. We all know what it's like to want to try something new, when we've been told not to. It's something we start very early in our lives, challenging our parents before we can even walk or talk! But in Adam and Eve's case, the consequences were catastrophic; they weren't just trying a new fruit, a new experience, they were acting against the wishes of the One who had created them and given them everything, including their very life. They immediately felt shame at being naked, and fear, so that they tried to hide themselves from God. They blamed each other - and the serpent! - and were banished from their home in the garden to live in an inhospitable world, full of thistles and thorns,

hard work and pain. Not so very different from our experience today.

The mystery is therefore not whodunit, but how on earth can human beings be saved? Throughout the Old Testament, we can follow the gradual unfolding of God's plan to restore us, as W H Auden describes it, to the Garden of Eden. God's love for the world he created, and the people who live in it, was so great that he would not leave them in a state of fear, blame and hate. The story reveals gradually what God intends to do. God chose a man, Abraham, to be the father of the Israelite nation to carry the promise of restoration. The nation was given laws to show them the way God wanted them to live, but no-one was able to keep those laws. A system of sacrifice was instituted to point to both the seriousness of sin and the possibility of forgiveness. God sent messengers – prophets - who continually exhorted and encouraged the people to live as God wanted; but nearly always to no avail. God's own people (let alone the whole human race) constantly failed. God, however continued through it all to promise hope, restoration and a new beginning, 'the things into which angels long to look'. How could this promise possibly be fulfilled? What was the solution to the mystery? And whodunit?

The gospels tell us that at the right time, God sent his son, Jesus, as the one who was to put everything right. Jesus came as a baby, grew to be a man, went about teaching and preaching the good news of God's kingdom being restored, proving the truth of what he said by the miracles he performed. His message was received gladly

by many people, but not by most of the Jewish hierarchy, who plotted to put him to death. Incredible though it may seem, Jesus' death was not a mistake or a failure. It was an essential part of the mysterious plan of God to bring about a happy ending. Adam and Eve, being representatives of the whole human race, caused the problem by acting against the wishes of the God who created them; Jesus came as a perfect man, a “second Adam” and resolved the problem by, uniquely, acting fully in accordance with the wishes of God his Father.

God then brought about the second part of the mystery. Jesus was not left dead in the tomb - God raised him from the dead as a sign that the “murderer”, the serpent of old, the cause of our death and destroyer of our Eden, had been dealt with once and for all - along with our own sin and rebellion. That is good news for every one of us. Jesus has set us free from the old cycle of selfishness, sin and destruction and broken down the barrier that separates us from God. He has made it possible for us to know God again as our Heavenly Father. Through Jesus's death on the cross - when he both revealed the culprit (our innate sin) and destroyed its power - God has, in W H Auden's terms, restored us “to a state of innocence, where [we] may know love as love and not as the law.”

When we finish one of Agatha Christie's murder mysteries, we may feel either a sense of satisfaction that the case has been solved, or frustration that the clues were too obscure to enable us to guess whodunit. We may continue to tussle with the story for a bit, trying to

resolve our feelings or responses to the story, but essentially, our life will not be changed by reading it. The story of God's mystery, however, can be life changing. God still passionately wants us to experience 'the happy ending' - for each of us to know his love and acceptance and purpose for our lives.

It is therefore perhaps no surprise that in his letter to the Ephesians (part of the New Testament), St. Paul refers several times to 'the mystery hidden for ages but now revealed'. Similarly, letters from Peter and the writer to the Hebrews (another mystery! no-one knows for sure who wrote this letter!) speak about hidden things into which previous generations longed to look.

As we have seen this mystery first hidden and then later revealed in the Bible spans the whole of human history and effects the entire human race. It must therefore surely be the *greatest mystery of all !*

If you would like to know more about the Christian faith, try an Alpha Course or a Christianity Explored Course near you.



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