

Mysteries take up a large percentage of shelf space in libraries and bookstores. They are the most popular form of fiction. People just love a good mystery. I must admit; I land in that category. Actually, there is one sliver of the mystery business that I'm a little obsessed about.

The mystery books that I love by the most by far are the 'Spenser' novels by Robert B. Parker. Spenser is a smart-talking, yet honorable, tough guy with a good heart who works as a Private Detective in Boston. He solves the mystery often by annoying people enough so they'll do something incriminating. The author died a few years ago and I felt like I was like losing a whole group of friends. Happily, Robert B. Parker's estate has franchised the books. The writer who is now writing the Spenser books is no Parker, but he's pretty darn good, or good enough to satisfy the addict.

Of course, the character in all of fiction that is easily the champion of popularity in mystery both books and movies is Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conant Doyle. Sherlock Holmes is the Babe Ruth of mysteries and laid down the law on how mysteries are to be solved.

What makes Holmes mysteries so popular is the assurance that one rational mind, fully applied, will be able to unravel all mysteries. In an age of uncertainty people need the certainty that while life's mysteries elude them, they will not elude Sherlock Holmes. Mysteries in pop

fiction advance the radical notion that uncertainty can be eliminated, and puzzles can be solved by the application of reason and research. A mystery is a problem to be solved.

The truth is, however, that there are mysteries that cannot be solved nor should they be solved. There are mysteries that are rooted in theology that are only to be entered into in wonder and awe. The hallmark of true mysteries is uncertainty. Let's listen to the words of Albert Einstein on the topic of mysteries:

“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.”

The mysteries of God are things to be cherished with a degree of reverence, confidence, and hope. A mystery is something we enter into, a relationship if you will, that is more than purely rational. This is what a true mystery is.

What popular fiction calls mystery is actually a problem. In Holmes, Spenser, Miss Marple, you name it they are dealing with a problem, a vexation awaiting a solution. It is something that the reader or watcher can participate in and solve so you can move onto the next problem, in the next book, movie, or TV show.

A true mystery, a mystery of faith is far greater and more wondrous than a problem, no matter how fascinating and complicated

the problem is. Mysteries are the components of miracles, wonder, awe, and hope.

This brings us to what Advent is all about. I know I have a slim chance of getting this concept to take hold, but please listen to this. Advent is not the season of preparation for Christmas. It is a season of anticipation, but not of the birth in Bethlehem. It happens to be the season that falls on the calendar just prior to Christmas so there is a natural association. But Advent and Christmas have very little if anything to do with each other.

Advent anticipates what we call ‘the second coming of Christ.’ The birth in Bethlehem is the first coming of Christ, the Incarnation. The second coming is called many things, among them the rapture, Armageddon, the end times, the Parousia, and the apocalypse are among the names for it.

Let’s hear again in this morning’s lesson how the Gospel of Mark envisions that: “But in those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time men will see the son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.” (Mk 13: 24-26)

This concept of the second coming is part of Christian Doctrine. This is a closely held belief. For some Christians it is held more

centrally than others but is a doctrine, a belief. *That* is what Advent is about. Advent does not anticipate the birth in Bethlehem; it anticipates the second coming, the Parousia.

Those of us that grew up Roman Catholic will remember the priest saying, “Let us proclaim the mystery of faith.” The congregation responds, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” Roman Catholics don’t say that anymore but Episcopalians and Lutherans still do in their Communion liturgies.

This is a mystery. The idea that Christ will come again to end the world, as we know it. Mark says that Christ will, “gather his elect from the four winds,” meaning the people who live by God’s Word will be brought by Christ to heaven and those that don’t, well...

Now, this is a mystery not to be solved or even understood. This is a mystery of faith. It is not the only one. The others are in the past yet are still mysteries. The Incarnation, for example, how did it actually happen when God became man? How could that happen? The Resurrection is another example, there were no eye witnesses so how did Jesus actually rise into a being that could walk through locked doors, yet have substance enough that his wounds could be felt. These are mysteries of faith to be entered into faithfully and not figured out. For some, they are full of uncertainty and doubt.

If the things that all ready happened are such great mysteries, what about something that is predicted to happen? This is an even more

spectacular mystery than the mysteries that have already taken place. True mysteries are unfathomable by human logic, yet when they are held in faith they can sooth the sin-sick soul.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. This is like the child who has to know that he or she is loved, and not simply being provided for. So too do all human beings need to know that we are loved, not just in the past where God's mysteries in Christ already happened, but now, and in the future where darkness and ignorance will lead to light and knowledge.

Christ will come again is the greatest hope statement of all. Knowing how unlovable, unloving, and unlovely we are, to believe that God loves us so to send his only Son to die for us. Not only that but Christ will come again to gather us up. This gives us a vision of our future that is joyful. We cannot explain it. We cannot fathom it. We can only enter into it faithfully. We can move forward with God in our sights.

This is a future with a goal, with a destination, with a destiny. Henry Rosovsky once said, "If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there." Advent is about having a destination. It anticipates the time and place where we shall see God as God, face to face, and be known by name.

The time, the place, what it will be like, what it will look like, what it will feel like are all shrouded in mystery now. But the destination is

the place where we are meant to be. While there is joy in the journey, and many detours, distractions, and difficulties along the way, but the faithful are not deterred. In faith, every fiber of our being can lead us to the mysterious place that is better than this.

In that place the Lord will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and will make manifest the counsels of the heart and we shall live in praise and love of God in God's eternal glory. For this great mystery of faith made real for us in Jesus, the Christ who shares His destiny with us, we praise God and give him our humble thanksgiving.

AMEN