

FOREWORD

G K Chesterton amuses the whimsical, sustains the faithful and thoroughly entertains anyone who likes a good detective yarn with a pleasing mesh of clues. He is the modern Cadfael, mixing theology with sleuthery, holiness with modesty, observing human nature and making both allowances for it and deductions from it in a world which had not yet discovered DNA or computers. He is long overdue for re-discovery.

The character of Father Brown was apparently based on that of a priest of Chesterton's acquaintance who had converted him to Catholicism and, if it was a faithful rendering, that priest must have been quite a remarkable figure for Father Brown is an unusual mix of the orthodox and the humorous. That is what makes him appealing to both devout Catholic and seasoned cynic.

Catholics will take delight in spotting clues, which others might miss. I remember shrieking with triumph, as a teenager watching a film adaptation of one of the stories, when the fake priest ordered a ham sandwich – on a Friday! The criminal in question, Flambeau, went on to help Father Brown in future mysteries. The underlying message was, therefore, the possibility of redemption but it is subtly rather than didactically presented. Indeed one of Chesterton's charms is that the message is always there but never shouts at you.

'Yes,' answered Father Brown, 'I believe in miracles. I believe in man-eating tigers, but I don't see them running about everywhere. If I want any miracles I know where to get them.'
(The Miracle of Moon Crescent).

In other words he is devout but a long way from gullible. God, not man, makes miracles happen and he, the priest, knows the difference between a miracle and its impostor. Indeed the hunt

for the villain is always the product of the rational rather than the supernatural, which is what makes the books so intriguing for all.

The young man... called to the dog and left the room with vague but breezy farewells. But he had to call the dog twice, for the dog had remained behind quite motionless for a moment, looking up steadily at Father Brown as the wolf looked at St Francis. (The Oracle of the Dog).

It is not Father Brown who is holding the dog's attention but the truth of what he has just been saying. The man, made indifferent by intellect, misses what the animal, which relies on instinct, hears. Chesterton's work is full of such moments.

For some reason detectives of this period had to be physically odd. Like Poirot, Father Brown is short. He does not twirl a moustache as does Christie's hero but he does carry an umbrella and the umbrella becomes so indispensable a part of him as to seem eccentric. It is as if he is saying 'I am human, not superhuman, even though I understand what you do not yet understand.'

Father Brown is undeniably Chesterton's most famous work but it formed only part of an amazing oeuvre which ran to some eighty books plus short stories, plays and non-fiction. Witty, combative, of immense girth, Chesterton created his opposite in Father Brown in all but his beliefs. The man who, in real life, debated his faith with George Bernard Shaw in fiction debates with everyone as his detective priest takes on cynics and frauds, unbelievers and murderers with not only faith but reason.

The challenge is as fresh today as it was in the first half of the last century and Father Brown just as loveable as he is sharp.

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