

## Memorial Address for Colin Dexter

I was lucky enough to have met Colin Dexter on a number of occasions. He came out to open the Cuddesdon Parish Fete when I was Principal of the College there. The Cuddesdon Parish Fete is a grand occasion, and we always have a minor or major celebrity to open the proceedings. One of the lead guitarists from Supergrass one year (he lived in Wheatley); Richard Coles another year (he's clergy); me, one year (I always chaired the committee!). If you are desperate, try the Bishop. Boris Johnson, when he was our MP, always said 'no'. (But we felt it would be rude not to ask).

So we asked Colin one year, and he said 'yes'. Now leaving aside the fact that the Cuddesdon Parish Fete could make a lovely setting for a Midsomer Murders Episode, the only tricky thing our celebrity has to do is speak for a few minutes. Or several, in Colin's case. And then some.

My recollection of the fete is that he was witty, droll, self-deprecating and down-to-earth. In short, just the man. He told a story against himself that day, of going into his local B&Q or Homebase, shortly after the TV Series *Inspector Morse* had really peaked. At the checkout, the sales assistant eyed him up and down, and smiled. Could I have your signature please, Mr Dexter, she asked. Of course, he said. What shall I write on, and is there anything else you want me to put? A greeting, perhaps? She looked puzzled. No, she said, I just want you to sign this credit card receipt. Put your signature there. You forgot.

I next met him at our Biblethon - a sponsored public reading of the whole bible to raise money for the new chapel. He insisted on reading the book of Jonah. When I asked him why, he said was because it had an ambiguous ending. And perhaps like Morse, Jonah was rather irascible.

I know that Richard Morse is here today, the son of Sir Jeremy Morse. Jeremy Morse was a banker, cruciverbalist and chess composer and was chairman of Lloyds Bank. The real Morse had a keen interest in cryptic crosswords and was a skilful writer of clues. He had puzzles published under the pseudonym "Esrom" (his surname in reverse). Colin Dexter's fictional detective, Inspector Morse, was named after him.

Norman Colin Dexter OBE was born of the Feast of all the angels - Michaelmas - 29 September 1930. His *Inspector Morse* series of novels, which were written between 1975 and 1999 were adapted as an ITV television series, *Inspector Morse*, from 1987 to 2000. And his other characters have spawned a sequel series, *Lewis*, and a prequel series, *Endeavour*.

Colin was a Lincolnshire Land, was born in Stamford. He had a brother, John, a fellow classicist, who taught Classics at The King's School, Peterborough, and a sister, Avril. Colin's father, Alfred, ran a small garage and taxi company. After leaving school, did national service with the Royal Corps of Signals and then he went to up to read Classics at Christ's College, Cambridge, graduating in 1953.

Colin began his post-university career as a teacher, eventually becoming senior Classics teacher at Corby Grammar School, Northamptonshire, in 1959. He married Dorothy Cooper in 1956, and they had a daughter, Sally, and a son, Jeremy. In 1966, he was forced by the onset of deafness to retire from teaching. At which point he took up the post of senior assistant secretary at the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations (UODLE) in Oxford, a job he held until retirement in 1988.

Colin's first published writings were general studies text books. But he began to write mysteries in 1972 during a family holiday. The *Last Bus to Woodstock* was published in 1975 which introduced the character of Inspector Morse, the irascible detective whose penchants for cryptic crosswords, English literature, cask ale, and Wagner reflected Colin's enthusiasms. There were thirty-three two-hour episodes of the ITV television series *Inspector Morse*, produced between 1987 and 2000. To some extent, Colin Dexter's writings made Oxford the Murder Capital of England. I often remark on this when I lecture abroad that danger lurks behind every Oxford Quad; every College Dinner; every Town-Gown relationship. Actually, come to think of it, that might be true....

In the manner of Alfred Hitchcock, Colin also made a cameo appearance in almost all episodes. From 2006 to 2016, Morse's assistant Robbie Lewis featured in a 33-episode ITV series titled *Lewis*. A prequel series, *Endeavour*, featuring a young Morse, began airing on the ITV network in 2012. Dexter was a consultant. As with *Morse*, Dexter occasionally made cameo appearances in *Lewis* and *Endeavour*.

Colin received numerous Crime Writers' Association awards: two Silver Daggers; two Gold Daggers; and a Cartier Diamond Dagger for lifetime achievement in 1997. In 2005 Dexter became a Fellow by Special Election of St Cross College, Oxford. In 2000 Dexter was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for services to literature. In 2001 he was awarded the Freedom of the City of Oxford. In September 2011, the University of Lincoln awarded Dexter an honorary Doctor of Letters degree.

Colin's life was full of interest and intrigue. Colin's father was a taxi driver and was employed for many an evening ferrying the Prince of Wales to and from his mistress, consuming rather too much alcohol while he waited outside and driving home the worse for wear. Colin was raised a Methodist. He was also a keen support of Leicester City Football Club, and was delighted when they won the Premier League under Claudio Ranieri in 2016. On two occasions Colin was challenged by someone whose name he inadvertently used – in twisting one name he changed it to his parish vicar. In the very first Morse film he changed one name, only to discover that he had picked on another belonging to someone who frequented the pub in the film

In churches across the land, the usual gospel text to be read on the evening of Easter Sunday is the encounter with two minor disciples on the road to Emmaus. As St. Luke narrates the story, two people are ambling down the road, discussing the death of Jesus and the fact that some say he is now alive. There is confusion, anguish and grief: the body of Jesus has gone, and there is no way of knowing what has happened. The two are joined by a third party, a shadowy figure whose identity is not revealed.

Yes, it's a mystery. In the conversation that ensues, Luke says the stranger listens to the disciples, with empathy, and starts to explain the gospel: that the Messiah must suffer, die - and then be raised. Given that this stranger is Jesus, you'd expect the two disciples to recognise Jesus. Can they not remember the sound of his voice? The features of his face? Apparently not, for Luke says that the journey and conversation continues until dusk, at which point the disciples prevail upon the stranger to stay for supper. He agrees, and only when he breaks bread at table, he is recognised as Jesus: the stranger becomes the revealed one. And then Luke adds helpfully (and mysteriously) that he 'immediately vanished from their midst'. Ah, the elusive proof; if only.

Luke's story is, of course, a tease. Jesus taught his disciples to see himself in the face of the stranger, so it is hardly surprising that he appears in guise as one to test them. The disciples pass this exam, but hardly with distinction. There is also an element of detective story in Luke's methods. The story of Emmaus is littered with clues as to who this stranger is.

The astute might guess immediately, but most of us – like watching a gripping episode of *Inspector Morse* – don't crack the code until the final ten minutes. Not until the stranger breaks the bread does the penny drop; but the clues have been there since the beginning of the journey. It is almost as though Luke is speaking just like Endeavour Morse might himself: 'Come on Lewis, use your head – *think!*' Of course, the resurrection stories have more to them than this. They are full of subtle nuances throughout, hinting that Jesus, who was dead, is now raised, and more alive than life itself. Jesus is not immediately recognisable, because he is both 'new' and yet the same – it takes time to see that this Jesus is the 'same Jesus' that was known only days before.

The Greek word for tomb literally means 'the place of memorialisation'. In basing Christian faith on an empty tomb, Christians are being instructed afresh. The empty tomb is a cipher; it says that this religious leader lives, not just in memory, but in life itself. Don't build a memorial then; live your life in God. This is important, for many Christians feel that their faith rests on constantly directing people to the empty tomb. But attempts to prove that the tomb is vacated are, oddly, rather misconceived. The Easter story directs us *away* from the empty tomb and guarding it as a shrine, and points us towards encounters in the future. Instead of holding fast to Jesus, the disciples are invited to try and follow this elusive figure, and know him in the breaking of the bread, the face of the stranger, and in the mystery of his presence.

The resurrection stories point forwards, not just backwards. They invite Christians to follow Christ into God's future, carrying their memories with them, but encountering God afresh, in ways that often confound and confuse as much as they comfort and console. The resurrection does not ask the church to build a memorial, with the inscription 'here lies the body of Jesus' (or at least it once did). Rather, the strangeness of Easter day asks the church and world to look at life differently: death has no more dominion. And the new dominion is *in* the body of Jesus, whom God has raised from death.

So the question for Easter is not '*how* did he do it?' but, rather, 'who is this stranger, and where is he now?' Or, as Morse might say to his erstwhile sidekick: 'No, no Lewis, not how, but *where* – we want to know where he is *now*'. And the answer the gospels give us is this: He is Risen.

It seems uncannily appropriate that we come here today, in the Season of Eastertide, to remember and give thanks for one of Oxford's Modern Legends. Colin Dexter - through his mind, imagination, novels and the TV spin-offs - has spawned an entirely new stream of tourism and tours in the city. Through his own gentle, self-deprecating and humorous demeanour, he has brought life and levity to those who knew him. His characters have engaged and inspired us. In many respects, he has joined that burgeoning pantheon of Oxford writers of crime fiction that includes, in a range, stretching from Dorothy L. Sayers, Edmund Crispin, Ronald Knox and Michael Innes.

Everyone here will have a treasured memory of Colin. But may I remind you of what I said a moment ago. Sometimes, we do not direct our gaze to a tomb in order to remember the life of a person who had such an extensive influence. Instead, we look at one another; and see the legacy in imaginations lit up, mysteries solved, characters loved, and justice done.

Colin Dexter graced us with nuanced novels, and fabulous fiction. But in real life, he still belongs to us. And always will. In his Endeavour, he has become one of Oxford's enduring treasures.

The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford