

TORMENTING CHRIST

⇒ *“The story is told of a man who prided himself on being exceedingly punctual. He followed a very precise routine every morning. His alarm went off at 6.30 a.m. He rose briskly, shaved, showered, ate his breakfast, brushed his teeth, picked up his briefcase, got into his car, drove to the nearby ferry landing, parked his car, rode the ferry across to the downtown business area, got off the ferry, walked smartly to his building, marched to the lift, rode to the seventeenth floor, hung up his coat, opened his briefcase, spread his papers out on his desk, and sat down in his chair at precisely 8.00 a.m. Not 8.01, not even 7.59. Always at 8.00 a.m.*

.....He followed this same routine without variation for eight years, until one morning his alarm didn't go off, and he overslept by fifteen minutes. When he did awake, he was panic-stricken. He rushed through his shower, nicked himself when he shaved, gulped down his breakfast, only half-way brushed his teeth, grabbed up his briefcase, jumped into his car, sped to the ferry landing, jumped out of his car, and looked for the ferry. There it was, out in the water, just a few feet from the dock. He said to himself, “I think I can make it,” and he ran down the dock towards the ferry at full speed. Reaching the edge of the pier he gave an enormous leap out over the water and miraculously landed with a loud thud on the deck of the ferry. The captain rushed down to make sure he was all right.

.....The captain said, “My word, that was a tremendous leap, but if you would have just waited another minute, we would have reached the dock, and you could have walked on.”

⇒ Now, you may not have routines in your life that are quite as rigid as that, but I guess that many of us will have a pattern to our lives that we don't like to have disturbed. For some of us it will be more flexible than others, but even if the disturbance may ultimately mean changes for the better, we would often still rather that things stayed just as they are with us in control! We get very comfortable with the way things are, we know what we're doing and when, we have an order and a pattern to our lives and any prospect of change can be very frightening. Perhaps thinking about life in that way may help us to understand the behaviour of some of the people in the story we have just read!

.....This passage that we've just heard immediately follows the story of the calming of the storm on the lake. We're probably more familiar with that story than we are with the one we've just heard, but despite our familiarity with that story, have you ever noticed that it's only after the storm has abated that the word “fear” comes into the story. The disciples on the lake were in “fear and amazement” at what Jesus had done. What was there about him that made them feel like that? Was there something frightening about this man who could do unimaginable things?

.....Well, the demon-possessed man in our story today seemed to think so. “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!” Don't torment me, don't disturb me, it says in some translations of this passage. But whichever word we use, we may wonder how a man who has been rejected by society, who is homeless, naked, and tormented by demons, could even begin to think that Jesus might make things any worse for him? How could Jesus torture or torment or disturb him?

.....Surely the only thing Jesus could possibly want to do is cure him, to set him free and to save him, to make things better for him – all the things that Jesus ever wants to do for any one of us.

⇒ And that is true of course. Jesus did want to do all of those things for him and for us now, but for all those things to happen to any one of us as individuals, we may well have to go through some experiences that we would describe as disturbing.

.....If we're honest, not many of us like to have the routine of our life disturbed or have the way in which we live challenged. If the bin men decide to change the day they collect, or the bus timetable gets changed; if the doctor changes his surgery hours, or the milkman delivers at a different time, if the broadband connection is working more slowly than it should or the electricity supply gets cut off for a brief period it can be deeply frustrating and it takes us some time to get used to it. All sorts of things can upset our routine, and we don't like it – and for a while we cannot begin to imagine that it might be a change for the better!!

.....And if someone dares to suggest that there might be a more effective way of us dealing with a particular situation or that we could see things from a slightly different perspective then our response may not always be all that it could be – we don't like to feel disturbed.

⇒ But, to be truly set free by Jesus Christ, to be saved by him, as the demon-possessed man in our story was, we need to recognise our need of it, and that sometimes involves us in facing up to some hard facts about ourselves. None of us like to do that, because it can be very painful to have to acknowledge our weaknesses and our failings. Often we'd prefer to keep our illusions about ourselves, kid ourselves we're doing alright, and tell ourselves that we don't need God's help. We're better than the person next door and or the person that sits behind us in church, so what's the problem?

.....John Wesley, who of course, founded Methodism, didn't seem to be in the business of letting people think they were doing alright. Many of you will know that the class meetings on which Methodism was built required people to confess their sins to one another. He made people face hard facts about themselves and their behaviour and he regularly used to expel people from the church because they weren't living up to what was expected of them as Methodist members. Here is one entry from his written works:

“The number of those who were expelled the society was sixty-four:-

- *Two for cursing and swearing*
- *Two for habitual Sabbath-breaking*
- *Seventeen for drunkenness*
- *Two for retailing spirituous liquors*
- *Three for quarrelling and brawling*
- *One for beating his wife*
- *Three for habitual, wilful lying*
- *Four for railing and evil-speaking*
- *One for idleness and laziness*
- *And Nine-and-twenty for lightness and carelessness.”*

.....I wonder how many of us would still be members if the same standards of behaviour were demanded today?! I don't expect you to answer that, and I'm not sorry that today the church focuses much more on the love, grace and mercy of God that welcomes all and recognises that we are all people who, left to our own devices, get things wrong and we need the help and encouragement of one another if we are to become more Christ-like as the Holy Spirit works in us. But still the point remains that sometimes we

need to face up to the hard truths about ourselves if those changes are going to come about. It can be disturbing!

⇒ But, if we are ever going to be whole people, the people God wants us to be and created us to be, then we do sometimes need to face up to hard facts about ourselves. Cast your mind back to when you first had a sense of God at work in you, drawing you into a relationship with him. Think back to when you first became aware of God's love for you and your need to respond to that. Think about when you were first challenged to live as a follower of Jesus. At that time, God may have felt like the enemy at first, demanding something of us that we don't want to give, or find it hard to give but eventually we recognise his love and his grace at work in the changes that he is asking of us.

.....For some of us there may well be lots of habits, attitudes or situations that bind us up and prevent us from living life as freely as we would want to, but however bad those habits and attitudes might be; we may actually feel quite frightened at the prospect of letting go of them. We know how to deal with them, and although deep down we may wish we could be free of them, we're frightened to go through the process of change.

.....But if we are going to be whole, we eventually have to own up to our inadequacies, and our weaknesses, however embarrassing, disturbing and painful that may be.

.....John Wesley was already a clergyman in the Anglican Church when he encountered Christ in a new way and was set free. He once confessed, *"I seem never to have loved God. I never did ... therefore I am only an honest heathen."* But later he was to say, *"I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation."*

⇒ So God may first appear to be a nuisance, disturbing the peace that we think we have, but as we acknowledge our weakness, as we say we are sorry for our selfishness, our pride, our anger, whatever it is that is preventing us from being at real peace, then God changes from being our tormentor to our companion, the source of peace and life. His tormenting and disturbing of us is only every for our own good in the end.

.....That was the experience of the demon-possessed man. He wanted Jesus to leave him alone, but eventually having gone through the pain and public exposure, he was finally at peace, and he only wanted to be with Jesus. The other folk in the town were then fearful and wanted Jesus to go away. Maybe it touched something deep within them, and disturbed their peace too as they saw the change in the demon-possessed man.

.....If we're going to know what real peace and freedom are, then we sometimes need to allow God to disturb us out of our complacency. We need to allow Jesus to turn our lives upside down, but then we will definitely find that our lives are the right way up, they will be the way God intended them to be as we allow his Spirit to be at work in us and as we respond positively to the changes God longs to make.