

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE.... A SPACE ODYSSEY

The advantage of being brought up, as I was, in the Plymouth Brethren is that, from a very early age, you know most of the stories in the Bible. The Brethren believe in very, very thorough Biblical teaching.

The disadvantage is that you then assume that everyone else will know everything in the Bible as well. You throw out casual references to stories only to find other people looking back at you with blank faces.

I had this experience once in Purley with a Church Membership class for teenagers. I just happened to mention "the gadarene swine," assuming that they would know what I was talking about. To this day I have not been able to remember why I wanted to introduce "gadarene swine" in a membership class but I spoke of them only to find the teenagers raising their hands: "*just a minute, Jennifer. What are gadarene swine?*" "*You must have heard the story,*" I said indignantly. "*The one about the pigs in the region called the Gadarenes. The pigs that went mad-you know!*"

Blank looks all round. So, impatiently I gave them the outline of the story.

There was this man who was raving mad and lived in a graveyard. Jesus went to see him and it looked as though the man was possessed by demons. Jesus cast the demons out of the man and they went into a herd of pigs in the nearby field. The pigs then went mad and jumped off the cliffs into the sea. Now can we get on with the class?

No we could not. I had to wait again while the group fell about laughing. To them it was an incredibly funny story- all these pigs going mad and jumping off a cliff. And when I thought about it, I could understand why they should laugh. A madman running wild in a lonely, desolate place, a crowd of demons, animals going berserk- this was the stuff of legend and fantasy. It did not sound real to nicely-brought up young people in Surrey. No wonder they laughed!

The trouble is though, that while the factual details of the story do seem to belong in another world, the truth of the story hits us all at some time or other. There are dark and dangerous places in life. There are dark and dangerous places deep within us. And sooner or later we find ourselves where that madman was- in a place of darkness and chaos; in a state of panic and fear.

To a child the journey of faith looks so simple: love God, be good and all will be well. But as we grow older it all becomes much more complicated. Very few people get through life and faith without encountering dark places.

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We do not know what was wrong with the man in the story. Obviously he had what are now known as "behaviour problems." Normal people do not run around naked and wild in a graveyard. So we assume that he was suffering from a severe mental illness.

This could have been caused by external circumstances. Remember, he was living in an occupied country and the Romans could be pretty brutal with the people in their charge. This man might have seen members of his family crucified or murdered in other, equally horrific ways, as has happened to children today in Iraq. Or he might have seen his family all fall to victim to a deadly disease like leprosy, as have so many of the AIDS orphans today in Africa. He himself might have been abused. There are any number of reasons why his life had been so traumatic that it had "tipped him over the edge" into madness.

Or his illness might have been due to something in him, a chemical imbalance in the brain. We now know that some people are born with medical conditions which will cause them to lose control of themselves if not properly treated.

But to the people living in this man's society, all illnesses, whether of body or mind, were caused by demons. They believed in these malignant powers, spirits who would take possession of a person and either make them seriously ill or turn them insane. They were the spirits of chaos, thought to inhabit the sea. In the first chapter of Genesis-right at the start of the Bible- God was said to have overcome the forces of chaos and placed the earth safely above the waters. The demons were held at bay. But somehow, through time, they had gained the power to leave the sea, to cause trouble in human lives and devastation in the natural world.

So in the last chapter of Revelation- and the end of Bible- a new heaven and earth are promised in which there will be no sea at all. So, in other words, there will be no demons either and no sickness, no madness, no destruction. That was the way people of this time thought.

Nowadays we think differently. We recognise all kinds of reasons for physical and mental sickness. But unfortunately the results are just the same. People still find themselves overwhelmed by horror; trapped in despair, tossed about by trouble. No, most of us still do not run around naked in a graveyard but we do know what it is like to feel exposed, vulnerable and unprotected. We do know what it is like to feel as though we are living with nothing but death and devastation around us. We do know what it is like to want to shout and curse and cry in rage, fear and frustration. We have some idea of the place where that madman was and, like him, we have felt that there was no way out, no light at the end of the tunnel, no resurrection.
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There have been a lot of programmes on television in recent years which make a point of bringing out what they call "the darker side" of human nature and "the darker side" of life. They have explored and exposed the destructive urges, the inner confusion, the twisted emotions in human beings. They have explored and exposed the corruptions, the abuses, the brutalities in human society. They have forced us out of the age of innocence, where nothing too bad ever happened to people who behaved nicely and did what they were told by the Squire and the Vicar who were both, naturally, of impeccable character. They have confronted us with the powers of darkness- in us and in the world as a whole. We can no longer deny the darker side of human life or assume that it is only something which other people experience.

But this does not sound much like a journey of faith; a life walking hand in hand with God. It is not easy to know how to handle the darker side of life as a Christian. Some churches, for example, simply refuse to take on board any possibility of child abuse happening within a Christian congregation and ignore all Good Practice guidelines. Some Christian parents believe that, if they guard their children carefully enough and keep them right out of the big bad world, then nothing too nasty can happen to them or in them. Many Christians believe that their faith should somehow exempt them from having to travel in dark places and therefore, when life is dark for them, either they have done something wrong and God has abandoned them or God has simply let them down.

The journey of faith is like a space odyssey. We never know where it will take us. We never know into what black holes we may fall. We never know the challenges and dangers that wait for us. But we do have a guide. We do have a Saviour. And so, although the darkness and danger are all too real, and although as Christians we cannot claim exemption, we do have good reason to know that we shall get through.

An American Minister called Calvin Miller wrote a long epic poem called *The Singer* in which he retells the story of creation, of good and evil and of Jesus Christ's saving work. Jesus is "The Singer" and, after he has come back from death, he finds the madman who has sunk back into madness and despair. He sings again the song of freedom and light. And this is how the epic poem comes to an end:

The chains unlocked themselves and fell away. The Madman left the dark and hurried into day.

Like autumn leaves triumph swirled upward into sky. The song came on for ever. And distant quasars hurrying in space marvelled that the dull and joyless world had finally come of age.

Thus (earth) joined the universe who knew the song so long before, when the parent stars themselves were tracked by wounded feet. And for a thousand years the music never ceased. It ricocheted through canyons and hung in promise over all (earth's) seas.

And those who know the Ancient Star-Song watch with singing for the sign of footprints in the galaxies through which the little planet rides in routine cycles of despair. But joy seldom sleeps for long.

And someday in a lonely moment mankind will shake an unfamiliar hand and find it wounded.

Amen.