

WHAT HAVE YOU TO DO WITH US, JESUS OF NAZARETH?
HAVE YOU COME TO DESTROY US? Mark 21:24

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A Mid-Night Visitor

It is a singular experience to be confronted with someone who believes that you are out to kill them. I say this with some conviction because it once happened to me.

My previous house was a detached building in the middle of a square of tenement buildings. We were surrounded by neighbours.

One night at around 2.00 in the morning I was awaked by a voice which seemed to be shouting in the middle of the backyard. I looked out and indeed there was the figure of somebody directing bilious speech up to me bedroom window. I got up, flung a dressing gown round my shoulders, and ran down to put on the outside light and open the door.

There stood a man in his late thirties who looked quite possessed and who, when I opened the door, hurtled the words at me: **Why are you trying to kill me?**
Why are you trying to kill me?

I recognised who he was. He had been to my house before. Indeed he had been inside. Someone had recommended that he should come to talk...which is what he did endlessly. The poor soul suffered from schizophrenia. He spent much of his life in a psychiatric hospital. His name , I remembered, was Ian.

So I said to him in as calm a voice as possible ‘ What do you mean that I’m trying to kill you?’

And off he went again, roaring the accusation at the pitch of his voice... until eventually, in answer to my query as to where this happened, he said that he had been walking along the road and that I had tried to run into him with my headlights blazing.

I was tempted to smile... for the first time in what was otherwise a frightening exchange...as I reminded him that I didn’t have a car and that I couldn’t drive...so it couldn’t have been me. He went away unconvinced.

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Like Jesus’ Experience?

Is that very like what happened when Jesus was confronted by the man who shouted at him. Yes....but.

And the BUT is important.

There are two differences. The first is that the man who confronted Jesus did so not in the open air but in a synagogue, a place of worship, a holy space. And the second that the man who confronted Jesus did not say,

Why are you trying to kill ME?
but
Have you come to destroy US?

Does the personal pronoun plural rather than singular make any difference? I think it does. And I offer three possibilities as to what it might refer to.

LEGION

There is another, quite distinct moment in Jesus' ministry when he confronts a man who is possessed... which may refer to demon possession or may have to do with psychotic illness. This is a man at the side of a lake who is tied to shackles from time to time to prevent him from injuring himself or others. He is clearly distressed.

Jesus asks him, 'What is your name?'
and he replies: 'My name is Legion, for there are many of us.'

We are all, in a way, plural creatures.

We carry within our personality different selves, and if our being is dysfunctional there may be many reasons.

Multi-Causal Illness

Illness both physical and mental is often multi causal. As a geriatric doctor and he or she will say that people don't die of old age as if it were a disease. There may be in their diminished circumstances several things wrong with them...some of which may be curable, some not.

When people are affected by mental illness, it can be that there is not one but several areas of their life.. several selves which are dysfunctional...

Their marriage is on the rocks
Their relationship with their mother is strained
Things aren't going well at work
They have got into debt
They are drinking too much.

What should be healthy personalities. healthy selves within them have turned into demons.

The truth-teller has become a liar,
The faithful husband has become a philanderer
The genial host has become an alcoholic
The honest broker has become a swindler
The confidant has become a gossip
Virtues have been displaced by vices
The good selves have become eclipsed by malevolent spirits.
The angels have become demons

crying out in hope not fear

And perhaps not in fear but in hope
not in fear but in hope
the tragic wreck of a man cries out:

Have you come to destroy us?
O please destroy us!
O please take away all these ghosts
so that I can be healthy again.

Orphaned children

A beautiful sage in Scotland, an old pastor who had himself suffered from mental illness and recovered, would frequently say to others who were in the process of sensing that their personality was disintegrating...

A nervous breakdown happens when all your orphaned children
cry out to be loved

A nervous breakdown happens when all your orphaned children cry out to be loved.

Was this what was happening to the man whom Jesus met... that all the good selves within him had been swallowed up by baser instincts and he was pleading to have these dysfunctional parts of his personality put to silence?

Have you come to destroy US?

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THE GREAT BODY OF OPINION

Or is it something a little less complex. Is the man using the plural to suggest that there are other people who feel as maladjusted as himself, and he doesn't want to feel alone in his complaint.

We all do that sometimes don't we?

Politicians who never leave the debating chamber do it frequently. They say 'A lot of people are telling me..' Or 'I hear a lot of people saying..' but they never give names or numbers.

In a church where I was a student, there was an elder whose favourite tactic in expressing his discontent was to give the impression that he was the spokesperson for a crowd. One day he came into the vestry (parlour) while the pastor and I were preparing for worship and launched into a diatribe about the church youth group saying repeatedly,

There's a great body of opinion... very unhappy about what happens in the church halls on a Sunday evening... a great body of opinion.

When he had gone, I said to the pastor: who is he referring to as regards the 'great body of opinion?' And the pastor answered,

Have you ever seen Andrew's wife?

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THE CONTEXT OF THE SYNAGOGUE

Have you come to destroy US

I mentioned that there were two differences between the episode I had with a man suffering from schizophrenia and the man who confronted Jesus.

One was the use of the plural,

The other was the fact that the incident happened not in a backyard but in a synagogue. And here the man ...at the beginning of Jesus' ministry is being prophetic...because he is actually articulating what somebody wanted to say every time Jesus entered religious precincts:

Jesus in religious precincts.

His first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth has hardly got underway when the congregation rise up and manhandle him to the brow of the hill on which the town is built intending to push him over the edge.

When he cures a man with polio in another synagogue, the Pharisees. -according to Matthew's Gospel - ' went out and conspired against him to destroy him.'

When in Mark's Gospel, he heals lepers, he sends them to the door of the priests who had banished them from religious precincts in order that they would declare them clean and reinstate them into the community. And what priest would want to do that...particularly when they were convinced that Jesus was the enemy.

When he dares in Luke's Gospel, on a Sabbath, to bring into the middle of another synagogue a woman who has been crippled for half of her life and straighten her limbs and give her a new life...the synagogue president feels so threatened that he tells the congregation that if they want healed, they should do it on the other six days of the week, not on the Sabbath, there is a group of dissidents who go into a corner plotting his demise.

When he walks about the temple precincts in John's Gospel, repeated attempts are made on his life because what he is saying threatens the security of religion.

And all Gospels record the chagrin of the religious authorities when he upsets the peace of the temple in three events associated with Holy Week:

He upsets the tables of money changers

He welcomes diseased people into the temple and heals them

He extols the rough voices of children.

Have you come to destroy us?

Have you come to destroy us?

The Mantra

That is the mantra which could have been repeated every time he goes into the precincts of religion.

There is something about Jesus which threatens those who think they have got religion right.

Ordination of a female elder.. 40 years on

Just the other evening, I met a man in Naples Florida who had been in Scotland in November and went to a church I know well where he was present where, for the first time, a woman was being ordained as an elder. Now the Church of Scotland has ordained women for almost 40 years. Why did it take this congregation so long?

Knowing it as I do, I have no doubt that under their previous long ministry, there was a preaching of the Gospel which avoided taking seriously the role of women in the life of faith, for in truth in scripture it is a threat to male hegemony. I do not have time to go through the women of the Hebrew Scriptures who have a high profile but I assure you that in 90% of the instances God uses them to thwart male power-plans.

When we come to the New Testament, the Gospels portray women as a constant threat...NOT to Jesus BUT to those with whom he engages. Because Jesus accepts and defends female disciples, he then becomes threat, a possible destroyer of male hegemony.

Threatening Women

Women who bring children to Jesus are turned away by the disciples until he rebukes them. The Woman at the Well is a threat to the disciples who fear she will contaminate Jesus' reputation. She becomes the first evangelist, bringing a whole village to her Lord. The woman who washes Jesus feet is a threat to Simon his host because of the love she shows. The woman who anoints Jesus head is a threat to Judas because she shows generosity while he is pilfering the petty cash.

Mary Magdalen who witnesses the resurrected Christ is disbelieved because she is a woman.

Jesus, it seems, has come to shut down the boys club and open the kingdom to all humanity irrespective of gender and blessed are they and blessed are those churches which recognise in women a necessary corrective to centuries of male arrogance.

(Lansdowne story???)

But the threat of Jesus coming to destroy is not felt solely in my country as the retarded congregations eventually catch up with their Lord.

The Mexicans

Two years ago I was speaking in an affluent neighbourhood not a thousand miles from here. It was a series of lectures which looked at biblically verifiable but commonly overlooked characteristics of Jesus.

On the second evening, I took people through Jesus' affection for people not of his Jewish faith. We looked at how he received gifts or help from
wise men from Iraq
a cross bearer from Libya
a woman from Syriacitizens of the 'axis of evil' welcomed by Jesus Christ.

We looked at how his first sermon was disrupted because he claimed, using scriptural precedent, that God did not just favour the Jews.

We looked at how he saw faith in a non-Jewish Roman centurion and gratitude in a Samaritan leper. We looked at his most famous parable... the Good Samaritan.. in which those who are discredited for showing no compassion are the representatives of Jesus' own faith, and the one who is the hero is a victim of Jewish racism.

The next day the pastor said to me that he thought what I had said the previous evening would have been hard for his congregation to hear. Why? I asked him... given that all I had done was to open up what was in the Gospels

'Because of the Mexicans' he said.

'I didn't see any, I replied.

And then he explained how in that wealthy vicinity people didn't mind Mexicans caring for their garden or doing their laundry, but they didn't want them to live nearby..and now it seemed like a settlement had started on the edge of the town.

That afternoon I happened to go into the local Roman Catholic church to pray. I sat towards the back and watched as three Mexican men in the space of 20 minutes, came in quite independent of each other, knelt before the altar to pray, blessed themselves and then left. And I wondered what was wrong with my co-religionists who could not see faith in the Mexicans as Jesus had seen in non- Jews.

HAVE YOU COME TO DESTROY US?

To destroy a closed circle to make it an open boulevard? Yes
To destroy a club in order to make it a community? Yes
To destroy theme park to latter day values in order that the Gospel can be incarnate in this
culture at this time ...yes

But to destroy US??

Jesus gives no reply..he just heals

Jesus never answers the question posed to him by the deranged man.
Did you notice that?

He never gives him a reply.
He does not argue a case.

He simply heals him.

That is both the great surprise and the great joy in Jesus...
that whatever our hesitation in accepting the threat of the Gospel,
he does not come to punish or to destroy,
to argue or outwit,
but to lovingly overcome our resistances, our prejudices, our backwardness
that we might be whole...
...that we might be whole.

TO THE ONE WHO MAKES THIS AND ALL THINGS POSSIBLE BE OUR PRAISE
AND OUR GLORY, NOW AND FOREVER . AMEN.