

### Xavier Herbert, the disturbing element

One of my favourite forms of literature is autobiography where people write about their own lives, often in order to make sense of them. I recall one autobiography by controversial Australian novelist Xavier Herbert who wrote “Poor Fellow My Country”, and “Capricornia.”

Herbert’s autobiography, written with frank honesty, traces his early life and career up until the point he became a writer. In reviewing the book historian Manning Clark says of Xavier Herbert: “He writes with all the passion of a great lover and a great hater”

Why this reference to Xavier Herbert and his autobiography this morning? Because of his book’s title - “Disturbing Element - “ Xavier Herbert, as evidenced by his life, was a disturbing element.

In his time Hebert wrote and advocated on a range of issues, including recognition of the past injustices meted out to Indigenous Australians and the present deplorable state of their community, the need for an Australian republic and a sustainable environment, issues that remain matters of concern today, yet it is hard to find copies of his books in bookstores.

Herbert, as Clark described him, was a passionate man; the sort of personality that demanded people form an opinion about him. People seemed either to love him or loathe him. Xavier Herbert was the sort of person one would not forget meeting. He would either be embraced as a hero or seen as a great danger or threat.

### Jesus, the Disturbing Element

I was reminded of Herbert’s autobiography – or more particularly its title “Disturbing Element” – when I read this week’s Gospel concerning the commencement of Jesus’ ministry and how he cured a man possessed by a demonic spirit. Jesus goes into the synagogue at Capernaum on the Sabbath and, after impressing people by teaching with great authority, is confronted by a man possessed by an unclean spirit which cries out: “*What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God.*”

By recording this story of Jesus’ curing the man possessed by the demonic at the beginning of his Gospel the evangelist Mark is warning us that Jesus’ ministry will be provocative, and will challenge Mark’s readers and our values, attitudes, beliefs, the values of the world and even the religious establishment. (It is not coincidental that this encounter took place in a synagogue on the Sabbath with religious leaders present.) In short, Mark is warning his readers/us: Jesus is going to be a ‘disturbing element’! ‘If you read on in my Gospel your lives may never be the same again.’

This picture of Jesus may seem at odds with the image we possibly formed in our childhood through hymns we learnt such as that by Charles Wesley:

*Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child;  
pity my simplicity, suffer me to come to Thee.*

How do we relate such gentle images of Jesus to that in Mark’s Gospel? I remember Catholic theologian Fr John Shea describing once how he attended a baptism where someone present prayed that the child would become “a friend of Jesus.” Shea recalls thinking to himself: “That is a very dangerous prayer.”

I sense what John Shea is suggesting, and what Mark wants us to understand, is that if we choose to follow Jesus – to become a friend of Jesus - we **will be** challenged and need to let go of unquestioned beliefs. Becoming a ‘friend of Jesus’ necessitates being open to the possibility that our priorities, attitudes, values will be challenged by the example of Jesus’ life; that Jesus Christ truly will become a disturbing element in our lives.

The Gospel – ‘Good News’ – of Jesus Christ will not only challenge us in our personal lives and relationships, but also challenge the values of the society in which we live; that we will need to have an opinion/attitude about the sort of world we wish to have.

### **An experience of being disturbed**

In some ways this past week has been a disturbing time for me. Last Monday I found myself in Darwin on a hot humid morning standing by the graveside of a close Aboriginal family friend, Rev Wali Fejo. Wali was a man of great compassion and generosity of spirit, despite the pain he carried with him of having been removed from his parents. At the funeral we were reminded of how, despite his father serving in the army during WWII, Wali was removed, supposedly for his own good, and raised in the Retta Dixon Home.

On rare occasions Wali spoke of how hard it was **to be only able to talk** to his mother through a barbed wire fence, of how his brother was six years old when sent to SA and Wali didn't see him for another seven years, and of his younger brother who was taken when he was still crawling. Yet Wali lived without bitterness, inspired as he was by the healing love and grace of God.

And then on Thursday morning I found myself outside Old Parliament House in a corroboree to mark the 40th anniversary of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. Whilst there was, in some ways, a hard political edge to the gathering, later to boil over in the afternoon after I had left, nonetheless numerous speakers referred to the ‘sacred’ nature of the event for them. Their use of the word ‘sacred’ suggested to me that for many of those present, the experience was very much about seeking and expressing their personal sense of identity and a desire for them and their culture to be recognised and respected. Once more I witnessed the pain and frustration people feel of being made to feel second or even third class citizens in one's own country.

And although disturbed and disappointed by the confrontational media images reporting the event, I am nonetheless more disturbed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ that will not let me walk away from the need to see justice done for Aboriginal people, for the destructive impact of past treatment to be acknowledged in the body politic of our nation, and the culture and place of our ‘original inhabitants’ in society affirmed with dignity and respect.

### **How is Jesus disturbing?**

But how then does this image of Jesus' as a ‘disturbing element’ sit with that from our childhood created by Charles Wesley's hymn? Do we have to let go our image of a gentle Jesus who feels for us in our sadness; whose love surrounds us, caring for us?

And here is the intriguing insight we discover; the truly disturbing element of Jesus' is his gentleness, his humility, his compassion and willingness to die a humiliating death on a cross as a sign of God's love for us and our world.

The evangelist Mark and John Shea are right to warn us about Jesus, the disturbing element, for his power is in his compassion, inspired as he is by the boundless love of God; he is more grace than we can handle, more forgiveness than we dare accept for ourselves.

### **Conclusion**

‘And so, dear readers,’ Mark warns us, ‘if you read beyond this point be prepared to be disturbed; for you are about to meet in these pages Jesus the Christ, the Holy One of God, and he will not leave you undisturbed. For he has been formed by love, is more grace than we can handle, more forgiveness than we can bear.’

To pray that a child become a friend of Jesus – the disturbing element – may well seem a dangerous prayer; but it is a prayer that takes us deep within ourselves and into the heart of God; a prayer that leads us

into a deeper understanding of who we are and how we may discover what it truly means to live with and for others.

This year, as we journey together through Mark's Gospel, may we allow ourselves to be disturbed and, in doing so, discover life.

Amen