**An Interview with Chris Aslan about Manacle**

*Q: This is a dark story. Why was it one you wanted to write?*

A: There are a few moments when reading the eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ life, where I’m left scratching my head in confusion. The story that I based this novel on, is one of them.

In the gospel accounts, the story begins with Jesus suddenly announcing to his apprentices that he wants to travel to the other side of the lake – an area of non-Jews and somewhere they would rarely, if ever, venture. En route, a huge storm prevents them from making landfall. It seems clear to me that this storm is not coincidental or simply bad weather, but nor does it prevent Jesus from arriving at his destination, where he comes to liberate a young man in bondage.

There are four requests in this story. In the first, the apprentices in the boat beg Jesus to wake up and help them in the storm. He does. The second request, is from the unclean spirits, who beg Jesus to not send them into the abyss. Jesus has mercy on them, too – and you never hear preachers talk about Jesus fulfilling demonic requests as I’m not sure we know what to do with that theologically. Then, thirdly, the townspeople, who have just lost all their savings due to the huge herds of pigs running into the lake to their deaths, beg Jesus to leave. They don’t want anymore trouble. Jesus does as they ask. So far, Jesus has done everything asked of him. Then, finally, the young man who has been spiritually tormented for years and treated as a wild animal by his own community, begs Jesus to let him join him. And Jesus says no.

I found this so bewildering as this last request seems to me to be the one that most deserves a ‘yes’. Instead, Jesus tells the young man to go back to his family in one gospel account and to go to the Decapolis (the ten cities) in another, to tell everyone about what the Lord had done for him. So, I wanted to explore why Jesus said this, without having any hard and fast answers, and to imagine what might have led up to the young man’s encounter with Jesus, and then what might have come next.

*Q: Few narratives are written in the second person. Why did you choose this device?*

A: The only books I’ve ever read using the second person are ‘choose-your-own-adventure’ style books. ‘You do this, and then you do that’ etc. There’s something uncomfortably directive and even coercive about reading in the second person, and for the section told from the perspective of the unclean spirits, this felt like the right approach. They also speak collectively, so there’s a fair bit of ‘we’ as well. I was quite relieved to reach the second half of the novel and switch to the more familiar first-person.

*Q: Couldn’t you have given this harrowing tale a happier ending?*

A: Of course I could, but in some ways the ending of this story is the ultimate happy ending, as Phin sees the a glimpse of the glories to come. Originally, I’d planned for Phin to be filled with the Holy Spirit, which would put an end to his nightmares. Then I realised that Phin had to return to his village, and that there could only be one way that this would end. I actually cried when the ending came to me, perhaps in part because I see a lot of myself in Phin, and I would have loved for things to have worked out better for him. However, as I wrote the novel, I was hearing stories from friends of mine living in countries where followers of Jesus are really persecuted, and I wanted to be true to their experience. For many followers of Jesus, walking in the footsteps of Jesus is good, but it’s also really hard and if we don’t have stories that reflect and perhaps normalise that, it can come as a surprise, whereas Jesus always made it clear that it would happen.