

# **The Celestial Journey of the Soul**



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*Zodiacal Themes in the Gospel of Mark*

By

Bill Darlison



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## *Introduction*

This book contains the text of 27 sermons delivered in the Dublin Unitarian church between Easter 2007 and Easter 2008. The sermons are based on my book *The Gospel and the Zodiac: The Secret Truth about Jesus*,\* and reflect that book's contention that individual sections of Mark's Gospel are informed by ideas and imagery corresponding to a particular sign of the zodiac, and that these 'zodiacal' sections would have originally been read and studied throughout the solar year, beginning at the spring equinox. These sermons are an attempt to present this radical reassessment of the Gospel of Mark in an informal and accessible way. Although there is some inevitable overlap, this volume is less concerned than *The Gospel and the Zodiac* with presenting the scholarly case for the thesis, and much more concerned with exploring the spiritual lessons carried by the individual Gospel sections.

The sermons are based on the assumption that the Gospel story is not just about a man called Jesus, who may or may not have lived 2,000 years ago, but about the passage of each individual through the various stages necessary in order to achieve 'enlightenment' or 'salvation' – hence the book's title, *The Celestial Journey of the Soul*. The Gospel story is about you and me; the stages of the human spiritual journey correspond with the stages of sun's yearly journey around the zodiac.

Each sermon is prefaced by my own translation of a passage from the Gospel of Mark, and, generally, by a classic spiritual story illustrating what I consider to be the main lesson of the Gospel text. Readers with time and inclination may want to read the various sections of Mark in their entirety and should be able to find a copy of the Gospel without too much difficulty. The New International Version or the Revised Standard Version are recommended, but some readers may prefer the beautiful, if rather archaic, prose of the Authorised Version. The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels and can be read through in an hour.

Although the 27 sermons can obviously be read at any time of the year, it may be instructive to follow the sequence throughout the solar year, starting at the spring equinox, and reading the relevant sections as the sun enters the individual zodiacal signs. So, the first two sections would be studied at the end of March, the next two when the sun enters Taurus around 21<sup>st</sup> April, and so on through the year. The specific dates mentioned in the sermons relate to the solar year beginning on March 21<sup>st</sup> 2007.

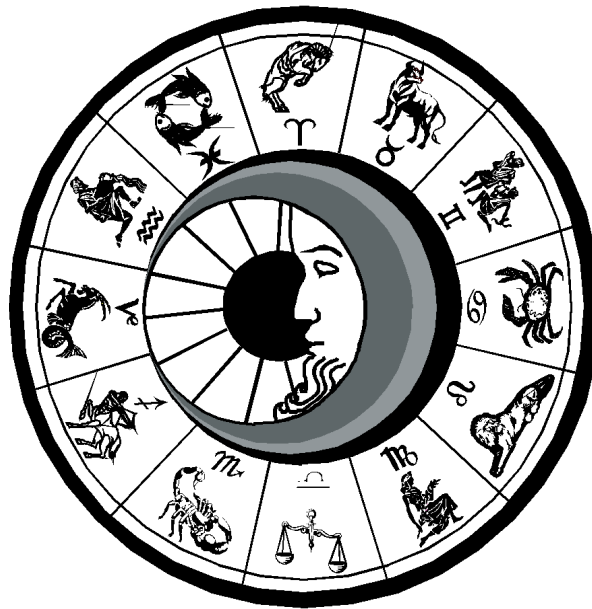
For those who are unfamiliar with the sequence and approximate dates of the sun's presence in each of the zodiacal signs, the table below might be helpful. It also includes the chapter and verse divisions of the corresponding sections of Mark's Gospel.

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\* Published by Duckworth / Overlook 2007



Sign	Approximate Dates	Section in Mark
Aries	Mar 21 - Apr 19	1:1 - 3:35
Taurus	Apr 20 - May 20	4:1 - 4:34
Gemini	May 21 - Jun 20	4:35 - 6:29
Cancer	Jun 21 - Jul 22	6:30 - 8:26
Leo	Jul 23 - Aug 22	8:27 - 9:29
Virgo	Aug 23 - Sep 22	9:30 - 9:50
Libra	Sep 23 - Oct 23	10:1 - 10:31
Scorpio	Oct 24 - Nov 21	10:32 - 10:52
Sagittarius	Nov 22 - Dec 21	11:1 - 11:26
Capricorn	Dec 22 - Jan 19	11:27 - 12:44
Aquarius	Jan 20 - Feb 19	13:1 - 14:16
Pisces	Feb 20 - Mar 20	14:17 - 16:18



These 27 sermons are given here pretty much as they were delivered, and no attempt has been made to modify their informal style.

*Bill Darlison*

## *What's the Good News?*

I found when I was teaching religious studies, that it often came as a shock to young people to discover that the word 'gospel' means 'good news'. 'What's good about it?' some would ask. 'It didn't do St. Peter any good. He was crucified upside down; and St. Paul had his head chopped off; and all the other apostles seem to have met a similar, grisly fate.' As the discussion developed, they would really start to list what they considered to be the negative aspects of the Christian enterprise. (Children, even children of pious parents, can be very irreverent!)

After reciting the litany of problems endured - and caused - by Christians throughout the world, they would look at the impact of Christianity on their own lives. Far from it being 'good news', they saw it as little more than an arbitrary collection of rules designed to stop them having a good time. William Blake had made much the same point centuries ago:

And priests in black gowns  
Were walking their rounds,  
And binding with briars  
My joys and desires.

I can remember developing similar attitudes when I reached adolescence and began to question received wisdom a little. Our priests told us that Jesus died for us because he loved us, and this seemed like a decent thing for someone to do, but when we were told that the sacrifice was necessary because God the Father demanded it in payment for human sin it began to appear grotesque. And sin seemed to be everywhere; we had to be constantly on our guard against the temptations of the devil because just one slip up at the wrong time could put our souls in jeopardy. There were sins of omission and sins of commission; venial sins and mortal sins; sins crying out to heaven for vengeance; sins of thought, word, and deed. There may only have been seven 'deadly' sins but there were thousands of others which could wound grievously. They were all deliciously appealing, of course, but were also capable of putting that black mark on the soul that would mean eternal hell for the really unfortunate, and aeons in purgatory for the rest. In school we talked about the categories of sin and the degrees of sinfulness and culpability. For example, when was stealing a mortal sin and when was it a venial sin? (In the fifties, £5 seemed to be the significant sum. Below £5 and it was venial; above £5 and it was mortal. What about four pounds nineteen shillings and eleven pence? Or five pounds and a penny? And what about inflation? Generally we were told to shut up at this point.) And then, of course, there were inappropriate thoughts, 'dirty' thoughts. Were they sinful? Could I go to hell for entertaining those thoughts that were more entertaining than any others, and which seemed to my adolescent mind to be constantly present? Yes,

was the disappointing answer.

And, we were told, God was looking all the time; maybe you could fool your mother or the police, but you couldn't fool God. He had a little book and he was noting it all down. We prayed for the grace of final repentance, that death wouldn't take us by surprise with unconfessed sins on our soul. The really scrupulous people – and I've known plenty over the years – could find themselves living in a perpetual state of anxiety.

How good was that news?

The Protestants didn't fare much better. They didn't have to go to church every week, or eat fish on Fridays, or go to confession to tell the priest the intimate details of their life, but they seemed to have equally onerous tasks to perform – reading the Bible, for example, which we Catholics didn't seem to bother about – and some mysterious things called 'being born again', and 'entering into a relationship with Jesus Christ', all of which seemed to leave them with that dutiful joylessness, which had inspired the 19<sup>th</sup> century British poet Algernon Swinburne to write of Jesus,

**Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean  
And the world has grown grey from thy breath.**

So, the Protestants with their grey world didn't seem to be the recipients of good news either.

I often envied my father. He was not a churchgoer but it never seemed to bother him. He didn't have to worry about all the details concerning sin and God and judgement, nor did he seem to regret their absence from his life. I asked the teacher about my dad, and about my friends, who were similarly unconcerned by religious scruples. 'Would they go to heaven?' The reply was instructive. 'Catholics have the best chance of heaven, but if a person lives a good life, according to the dictates of their conscience, and according to the extent of their knowledge of the laws of God, then it might be possible that they could be saved.'

It was a reasonably humane reply, but it got me thinking. If sins were only sins if you knew they were sins, then surely it would be better not to know? I'm actually at a disadvantage, I began to think. The unchurched majority in our own society, and the billions of people who had never heard about God and Jesus and the 'good news' were really better off than I was! I was going to church every week just to hear stuff that was doing little more than increasing my chances of going to hell! And missionaries, far from being benefactors of the human race, as I'd been told, were actually its enemies. Leaving the pagans in ignorance would mean that they could enjoy their present life to the full and escape punishment after death. The good news was actually bad news! My adolescent mind savoured the paradox.

Many years ago, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore performed a sketch about this particular problem. It ends with the pair musing about a group of 'Ephiscans' settling down to breakfast before going off for a day at the seaside. They are full of anticipation and excitement when a knock comes at the door. It's the postman.

He's brought a letter from St. Paul. 'Oh no!' they say. 'Trust Paul to spoil everything!' And, sure enough, on opening the letter they find Paul's simple instruction: 'Dear Ephiscans, Stop enjoying yourselves. God's about. Signed, Paul.'

Not terribly good news for the Ephiscans, either!

The problem is that Christianity has not really convinced us that the kingdom of God – which is what the good news is supposed to be about – is really all that appealing. Some say that the kingdom is to be built on earth as a kind of economic and political utopia, others that it is a state of blessedness with God after death; but, either way, there is always the implication that it is a kind of colourless existence, under the watchful all-seeing eye of a celestial Gillian McKeith, who will bully us into joyless conformity.

But this was never the original message of Jesus. His message, his 'good news', was very simple: the longed for kingdom of God is *here already* (Mark 1:15). Of course, if Jesus was promising an economic or political utopia, he was completely mistaken; if anything, things were to get worse for the Jews, and, two thousand years later, a just and equitable political system still eludes us. But the kingdom of God, as Jesus understood it, is a state of being, not a social arrangement. Entry into the kingdom requires a complete change of mind, a willingness to re-orientate our perceptions. This is the meaning of the Greek word *metanoia*, which is generally translated as 'repentance', but which involves much more than regret for past actions, and it certainly doesn't mean 'confessing our sins'. It implies a resolution to begin again from the beginning, *to make a fundamental alteration to the way one looks at the world*, which St. Paul calls 'transformation by the renewing of the mind'.\* Luke's Gospel tells us that 'The kingdom of God does not come visibly, nor will people say, "Here it is," or "There it is", because the kingdom of God is within you'.† From the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas we learn, 'The kingdom of the Father is already spread out on the earth, *and people aren't aware of it*,‡ which means that the kingdom of God is not something that we can create with political action and economic redistribution (important though these may be), nor is it something that will be imposed upon us by divine intervention; it is, instead, something we can discover *by correcting our eyesight*.

The Sufis, Islam's mystics, tell the story of how Nasrudin, the 'holy fool', would take his donkey across a frontier every day, its panniers loaded with straw. The customs inspector suspected the increasingly prosperous Nasrudin of smuggling, but despite regular and extensive searches, he could never find any contraband. Years later, when both were retired, they met in the marketplace. 'I know you were smuggling something,' said the customs officer. 'What was it? You can tell me now.'

'Donkeys,' replied Nasrudin.

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\* Romans 12:2

† Luke 17:21

‡ Saying 113

The story illustrates the Sufi contention - shared by Jesus - that the mystical goal, the kingdom of God, is nearer than is generally realised. In fact, it is here, 'at hand', but we are so busy looking for something else that we never find it. The mystic poet and painter William Blake, who stands in a similar esoteric tradition, writes:

To the eyes of a miser a guinea is far more beautiful than the sun, and a bag worn with use of money has more beautiful proportions than a vine filled with grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way. As a man is, so he sees. As the eye is formed, such are its powers.....

'When the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire, somewhat like a guinea?' 'O no, no, I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty".....If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.

For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern....

For everything that lives is holy.\*

To see the world as Blake saw it is to become a citizen of the Kingdom of God, and the good news is not that the kingdom is something to build, or something to 'get into' when we die, it is something to discover while we are still alive. And, what's more, it is possible to discover it, to open up those narrow chinks in the caverns of our minds, to cleanse the doors of perception, in the words of Blake, or to discover, as Thoreau discovered, that 'reality is fabulous'! And when we do, our individual and communal lives will be immeasurably enriched.

This is the real promise of the gospel. This is the real 'good news', and the Gospels themselves are guidebooks to the journey of transformation. They are not history for us to believe or to become sentimental about. It is my belief that the original gospel message gave us a map of the road towards transformation based on the metaphor of the sun's passage through the signs of the zodiac. The document that we call the Gospel of Mark preserves this original sequence. It begins in the spring, and throughout the coming year I will be giving sermons which point out the various spiritual lessons that the Gospel of Mark teaches us. The first of these sermons will be on 25<sup>th</sup> March, and will concern the first three chapters of Mark, which, I believe, are related to the zodiac sign of Aries, the sign of the springtime.

\* Haddon, pp 12-13



*Everybody wants to change the world.  
Nobody wants to change himself.*

*Tolstoy*





# ARIES

*21<sup>st</sup> March – 19<sup>th</sup> April*



*Aries is the sign of the springtime and so signifies new beginnings, new life. It is associated with the element Fire. Its symbol is the Ram or Lamb. It was called 'The Lord of the Head' by the Egyptians and 'The Hired Man' by the Babylonians. Its 'decans' (nearby constellations) are Cassiopeia, (the Reclining Woman), Perseus, (the Hero or the Bridegroom); and Cetus, (the Evil Sea Monster). In the constellation Perseus is the star Algol, called Rosh ha Satan (Satan's Head) by the Hebrews; it was considered the most evil star in the heavens.*

## *Pick up your Bed and walk!*

### **Mark 2:1-12**

A few days after he'd gone back to Capernaum, word of his whereabouts got around, and so many people gathered that there was no room, not even by the door, and he was speaking the word to them. And four men arrived carrying a paralytic. And not being able to get near him because of the crowd, they took off the roof of the house where he was, and when they'd made an opening they let down the stretcher on which the paralysed man was lying. When Jesus saw their faith he said to the paralysed man, 'Child, your sins are forgiven.' But there were some legal experts sitting there who were asking themselves, 'Why is he speaking such blasphemy? Only God can forgive sins!' But Jesus was immediately aware of their thoughts, and he said to them, 'What's your problem? What is easier to say to the paralysed man: "Your sins are forgiven", or "Get up, pick up your stretcher, and walk"? But in order to prove to you that the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins,' he said to the paralysed man, 'I say to you, get up, pick up your stretcher and go home!' And up he got immediately, and picking up his stretcher went out in front of everyone, so that they were all amazed and praising God saying, 'We've never seen anything like this!'



## *Nasrudin and the Chillies*

**O**ne day Nasrudin was feeling very thirsty. He'd been walking for a long time in the blazing sun and there was no water to be had anywhere. 'What I need is some luscious fruit. A big melon or a couple of oranges would be perfect,' he said to himself. As he turned the corner he saw a fruit and vegetable stall. His prayers had been answered!

'How much are your oranges?' he asked the stallholder, looking at the mountain of juicy oranges.

'Fifty cents each,' replied the man. 'Three for one euro.'

Nasrudin looked at the few coppers in his hand. Not enough for even one orange. And his thirst was burning! 'How much are your melons?' he inquired, optimistically.

'Seventy-five cents each, and cheap at the price.'

Disappointed but not defeated, Nasrudin looked at the rest of the stall, and some shiny little red pods caught his attention. They looked wonderfully refreshing. 'How much are those?' he asked excitedly.

'Three cents each,' replied the man.

'I'll take ten!'

Nasrudin handed over the thirty cents - all the money he had - and then he sat down in a nice shaded place and began to munch the red pods. He devoured the first one with no trouble, but mid way through the second his eyes began to water and his mouth began to burn. 'These are the hottest fruits I've ever tasted,' he thought. But he still carried on eating.

Just then, a passer by saw Nasrudin's distress. 'What on earth is the matter?' asked the concerned woman.

'I'm eating some fruit,' replied Nasrudin, 'but I've never tasted any like this before! They're hot!'

The woman looked closely at what Nasrudin was holding in his hand. 'No wonder they're hot!' she laughed, 'those are chillies! They're not for eating, they're for cooking. You put them in curries!'

But Nasrudin carried on eating. Tears were streaming down his bright red face, and his throat was burning unmercifully. 'You must stop eating them at once!' ordered the woman, 'or you'll make yourself very ill! I'm telling you they're not fruit!'

'Oh I know they're not fruit,' said Nasrudin, 'but I've paid for them so I'm going to finish them. I'm not one to waste my money!'



*There's a time for departure, even when there's no certain place to go.'*

*Tennessee Williams (born March 26<sup>th</sup> 1911)*

Last Wednesday was the first day of spring. It wasn't such a pleasant day in England; it was windy and cold, with the odd flurry of snow and sleet, but despite the inclement weather the evidence of new growth was everywhere, as it has been for a few weeks: the daffodils are blooming, the trees budding, the days lengthening. This is the season of new life, celebrated throughout human history with great rejoicing; the long sleep of winter is over, the sap is rising; it's when 'a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love' (and 'an old man's stomach turns!') It is an optimistic time, when, according to Chaucer, 'folk long to go on pilgrimages'; it's when we start to make our plans, change our jobs, sell our houses. Forget January 1<sup>st</sup>, with its dreary darkness and its forced bonhomie; this is the real 'new year' and has been acknowledged as such in the northern hemisphere since human beings appeared on earth. The ancients believed that the creation of the world took place at this time of the year (as well they might), and the Jewish people said that the Exodus occurred in springtime, the waking of the earth from its winter sleep providing a powerful metaphor for casting off the shackles of slavery in Egypt and moving on to freedom in the promised land.

The sun has entered the zodiac sign of Aries, the sign of the Ram or Lamb, and it is this sign that is reflected in the first three chapters of Mark's Gospel. Aries is the sign of the springtime, the sign of new beginnings, vigour, activity, and impetuosity. People who are born under Aries are often confrontational, somewhat aggressive, fiery, individualistic – like the ram itself, attacking head first, butting all those who would oppose it out of the way. One of the most characteristically Aries people of the modern world is Ian Paisley (born on April 6<sup>th</sup> 1926). He is fiercely individualistic, an initiator *par excellence*, until recently incapable of negotiation or compromise. Life for Ian Paisley is a battle, and 'No surrender!' his constant battle cry. This is how he expressed his disapproval of the pope's visit to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 1988:

**This is the battle of the Ages which we are engaged in. This is no Sunday school picnic; this is a battle for truth against the lie, the battle of Heaven against hell, the battle of Christ against the Antichrist!'** <sup>i</sup>

Richard Dawkins – born on 26<sup>th</sup> March - is another Aries. He is Darwin's champion, fearlessly challenging religion, even resurrecting the old idea of 'warfare' between religion and science. Never one to mince his words, Dawkins believes that astrologers are charlatans and should be put in jail, although he would no doubt be horrified to learn that his own attitudes actually demonstrate the truth of the ideas he is attacking! His equally disputatious colleague, Daniel Dennett, who is beating the rationalist, anti religious drum in America, was born just a year and two days after Dawkins, on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1942.<sup>ii</sup>

Of the great spiritual figures born under Aries, none is more typical or more appealing than the wonderful Teresa of Avila, who was born on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1515.

She's one of my very favourite saints. There's nothing wishy-washy about Teresa. Her earliest desire was to become a martyr, and when she was a little girl she ran away from home just so that she could be captured and executed by the Moors! Fortunately, her uncle saw her trying to escape and brought her back. She'd only gone down the road. Her love for God was passionate, expressed by her in unambiguously erotic terms, and the famous Bernini statue of Teresa shows her lost in almost orgasmic rapture. Although she was a nun, and although at times she was said to levitate when lost in ecstasy at mass, she was certainly no recluse: she founded and ran a religious order, travelling by cart in Spain's scorching heat to the various convents under her jurisdiction, suggesting improvements, disciplining backsliders, dealing with finances, all the while writing the most startling religious prose. She deliberately avoided marriage, which she considered a kind of slavery, making her into one of the great feminist figures of the past, and one of a number of Aries women who have fought the battle for female rights down the ages. (The other sign with more than its fair share of feminists is Aquarius).

Among the most characteristically Aries figures in the Bible is John the Baptist, the very first person we are introduced to in the Gospel of Mark. Mark doesn't tell us very much about him, except to say that he was dressed in no-nonsense Aries style – a garment made from camel's hair – and his diet didn't have too many frills either; he existed on locusts and wild honey! In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke he lambastes the religious people of his day, calling them 'a brood of vipers' and threatening them with all manner of calamities if they don't mend their ways. His plain speaking eventually brings about his downfall. His fearless but rather foolhardy rebuke of King Herod for marrying his sister-in-law, Herodias, gets him beheaded – a most Aries death, since Aries was said to govern the head and was even called 'The Lord of the Head' by the Egyptians.

The figure of Jesus that we meet in these early chapters of Mark is equally confrontational. He goes into battle against his religious opponents with breathtaking fervour and more than a dash of rashness. He takes on the Pharisees and the Scribes, and even tackles good old Satan himself, casting the devil out of various disturbed people, and claiming that the kingdom of Satan has been brought to an end. Maya Angelou, a great contemporary Aries figure (born 4<sup>th</sup> April 1928), says, 'I love to see a young girl go out and grab the world by the lapels; life's a bitch; you've got to go out and kick ass,' which is exactly what Jesus is shown to be doing. 'Gentle Jesus meek and mild'? Forget it! That's just religious sentimentality. This is Jesus kicking ass, and his ass kicking provokes the religious authorities so much that even sworn enemies, the patriotic Pharisees and the collaborative Herodians, are prepared to join forces to plot his death.

So, what are the spiritual lessons of Aries? There are a number of them, but, unfortunately we can't deal with them all. Today I want to look briefly at two.

The first is found in those passages where Jesus calls his first disciples. They read very strangely as history. Jesus simply says 'Follow me!' to James and John, and later to Levi, the tax collector, and, without further ado, they all leave

everything behind and impetuously follow him. No lengthy conversations, you notice; no police checks on his background; no, 'Give us a little time to think about it Jesus'. None of this; just, up and off. (Incidentally, James and John leave their father Zebedee in the boat 'along with the hired men'. <sup>iii</sup> 'The Hired Man' was the name of the constellation Aries in ancient Babylon, a fact I discovered long after I'd developed my theory of Mark, but which made the hairs stand up on the back of my head when I discovered it!)

These passages teach us that procrastination has no part to play in the spiritual life. If we dither around telling ourselves that we will begin our journey of self-transformation – which is what 'living a spiritual life' means – when circumstances are favourable, when we've found a congenial path, when we have more time, when the kids are grown, when we retire, then we might as well forget it. The Hindu sage, Sri Ramakrishna, tells the following story which illustrates this very point:

A wife once spoke to her husband, saying, 'My dear, I am very anxious about my brother. For the last few days he has been thinking of renouncing the world and of becoming a Sannyasin, and has begun preparations for it. He has been trying gradually to curb his desires and reduce his wants.' The husband replied, 'You need not be anxious about your brother. He will never become a Sannyasin. No one has ever renounced the world by making long preparations.' The wife asked, 'How then does one become a Sannyasin?' The husband answered, 'Do you wish to see how one renounces the world? Let me show you.' Saying this, instantly he tore his flowing dress into pieces, tied one piece round his loins, told his wife that she and all women were henceforth his mother, and left the house never to return. <sup>iv</sup>

That's the way to do it! As St. Paul says, 'Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation!' <sup>v</sup> That's lesson one: stop wasting time; stop kidding yourself that once you've sorted out the historical problems of Christianity to your own satisfaction, and come to satisfactory conclusions about the existence of God and the nature of Jesus, you'll start the process. Because you won't. The path beckons. Get on it.

Lesson two deals with another important aspect of the same procrastinating syndrome, and is brought out in the story of the paralysed man which we heard as our second reading this morning. You remember what happens: Jesus is teaching in somebody's house, but the place is crowded; even the doorway is packed with people. Four men carrying a paralysed man on a stretcher find that their way to Jesus is barred, so they go up on the roof, make a hole in the thatching, and lower the man down to Jesus. (Remember: Aries represents the head – or the roof!) Jesus is amazed by the faith of all concerned, and he tells the

man that his sins are forgiven, but this so incenses the Pharisees ('How dare he presume to forgive sins!' they say), that Jesus changes his tactics. 'Okay,' he says, 'I won't say "Your sins are forgiven", I'll say "Pick up your stretcher and walk!"' which the man proceeds to do.

When we stop bothering ourselves about the theological implications of the expression 'Your sins are forgiven', we can make some sense of this lovely story. It simply means, stop letting the past paralyse you. The man on the stretcher is you and I. We are all paralysed by the past, or, in the words of Aries writer Ram Dass (born April 6<sup>th</sup> 1931), 'we are too busy holding on to our unworthiness'. We like the past, sins and all, because we are safe there. We know where we are with our habits and traditions. We may be, in fact we probably are, like Nasrudin in our children's story, chewing ferociously on hot peppers, simply because that's what we've always done. 'Habit is a great deadener' says Arien Samuel Beckett (born April 13<sup>th</sup> 1906) in *Waiting for Godot*. But now is the time to stop, to let the past go, to break with the comforting habits of thought and action we've allowed to cripple us for so long.

Pick up that stretcher and walk!

And do it today!

These are two important lessons of Aries.



### The Zodiacal Man

Aries is shown 'ruling' the head



## *Who is my Mother?*

### **Mark 3:31-35**

And his mother and brothers came and were standing outside. They sent someone in to summon him. And a crowd was sitting around him and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and your sisters are outside; they are looking for you.' Jesus responded by saying, 'Who is my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those sitting in a circle round him, he said, 'Look. Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, and my mother.'



There are a number of incidents recorded in the Gospels in which, we are told, Jesus seems to act 'out of character'. The most famous one, of course, is of Jesus casting out the money changers in the temple, a scene which does not fit our image of him as a passive man of peace. John's Gospel tells us that he took a whip to them, and even though this might have been more of a symbolic gesture than a frenzied attack, his actions don't correspond terribly well with his words in the Sermon on the Mount about loving our enemies and turning the other cheek. Another example is the way he treats the gentile woman who begs him to cure her disturbed daughter. 'It's not right to give the children's food to the dogs,'<sup>vi</sup> he says, meaning that he was only prepared to heal the people of his own nation – 'the dogs' were all non-Jews. He eventually does heal the girl, but only after her mother has won him over with a smart rejoinder.

However, to say that on these and similar occasions Jesus was acting 'out of character' is really rather misleading. Our character comes out in what we do and what we say, and if Jesus said and did these things then they were part of his character. What we really mean is that Jesus seems to be acting in ways which don't quite square with the image of him that we carry around in our heads; but this image has been built up more from pious sermons, sentimental films, and apocryphal stories than from an actual close reading of the Gospel texts. According to the Gospels, Jesus was not always 'Mr. Nice Guy'; sometimes he could be extremely unpleasant. I have never found the Jesus of John's Gospel to be an appealing person at all. There are places where he seems to be arrogant, patronising, and self righteous. On one occasion, in chapter 7, he even seems to



be deceitful. ‘You should go to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles,’ say his brothers. ‘No, I’m not going to go,’ replies Jesus dismissively; but then he goes! And when he later tells his apostles that they are his friends *if they do what he tells them*,<sup>vii</sup> I find myself losing patience with him as a genuinely sympathetic and humane person.

But then, the Gospels were never intended to present a sentimental picture of the perfect man, in touch with his feminine side, a kind of prototype of St. Francis of Assisi, or Mahatma Gandhi. The Gospels are not character studies. Whatever conventional Christians say, the Gospels do not give us a rounded portrait of a person to emulate. In his words and actions, Jesus is demonstrating and expounding important spiritual principles, and these sometimes demand what, to us, appear as inconsistency.

Nowhere is this more in evidence than in a little passage which occurs at the end of what I have called the Aries section of the Gospel, in which Jesus seems to be repudiating his family. ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ he asks.

This is quite shocking isn’t it? And it is particularly shocking to Catholics who have elevated Jesus’ mother Mary to the status of goddess, and who have presented to us a picture of Jesus as a dutiful, obedient son within the ‘holy family’. And it is also shocking to Catholics because it tells us unequivocally that Jesus had brothers and sisters, demolishing at a stroke the Catholic doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, at least in so far as it is meant to be understood biologically.

But the embarrassment is not only to the Catholics. This passage calls into question Christendom’s general portrait of Jesus as a man who upholds ‘family values’, so beloved by the American Christian right, although how one could ever assume that an unmarried, childless man whose mother was a virgin and whose father was a ghost could represent a typical human family has always puzzled me.

The tension between Jesus and his immediate family is illustrated a little earlier in Mark’s Gospel, where we learn that his family members thought that he was out of his mind, and the other Gospels say nothing to contradict it. From the early chapters of Luke’s Gospel we learn of a twelve year old Jesus listening to the wise men in the temple rather than returning home with his parents, and in Matthew chapter 10, Jesus says, with almost unbelievable directness:

**Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household. Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.** <sup>viii</sup>

This is very unsettling stuff, which is probably why we don't hear it read aloud too often, but it is not a rant against monogamy or the nuclear family; it is not even a plea for more tolerance of alternative lifestyles. These passages are intended to alert us to an extremely important spiritual principle: that discovering and establishing one's identity, one's true individuality, within a communal context, and particularly within the family context, is extraordinarily difficult, but it is so important that nothing, not even those things demanded by our closest intimacies, can ever take precedence over it.

These incidents teach us that anyone intent on following the spiritual path has to break away from some pretty restricting and oppressive social conditioning, and the most effective agency of this conditioning is the family. We learn our earliest and most enduring lessons about life and relationships at our mother's knee; we inherit the family religion, or lack of it; we imbibe the family's values before we are weaned; we build a social identity by processing the thousands of messages which accumulate daily from the overt and subtle words and actions of our parents and our siblings. The family itself has its own dynamics, from the obvious age relationships among brothers and sisters - which usually requires the oldest child to be competent, the middle one to be troublesome, and the youngest to be spoiled - to the designated roles which are apportioned early and which seem impossible to shake off.

The Australian psychologist Dorothy Rowe says that when we get beneath the cosy facade that most families tend to present to the world we find some pretty disturbing dynamics, particularly in regard to the allocation of roles. 'You have been given a role in the family which is yours for life,' she says. 'You cannot escape it.' She is the intelligent one, he is the sensitive one, she is the daydreamer, he is ambitious. Rowe says that the greatest compliment her mother could give to anyone was, 'He is always the same.'

But these disturbing words of Jesus tell us unequivocally that we must not allow the prejudices of our family to determine the course of our spiritual life. As the novelist Sue Monk Kidd says, we have to pull away from the Collective They, to 'stand before the bare mystery of our own being.' 'I came to understand,' she writes, 'that there is an Authentic 'I' within, an 'I Am,' or divine spark within the soul', and that this 'true identity' transcends the outer roles which have been bequeathed to us by our family and our culture. To discover this true identity, the mark of God upon us, something as distinctive and unique as our fingerprints, is the *raison d'être* of our existence, and the only guarantee of personal fulfilment and of collective harmony. Ignoring this, mistaking uniqueness for madness, in ourselves or in others, is what Jesus calls 'the unforgivable sin'. It's unforgivable because in committing it we have missed the whole point of our existence. In the works of the Sufi sage Rumi, we find it expressed thus:

It is as if a king had sent you to a country to carry out one special, specific task. You go to the country and you perform a hundred other tasks, but if you have not performed the task you were sent for, it is as if you have performed nothing at all.

**So man has come into the world for a particular task, and this is his purpose. If he doesn't perform it, he will have done nothing.** ix

Each of us is responsible for bringing to birth that authentic self which lies buried beneath those layers of prejudice which stifle its emergence with their insistence on conformity, homogenisation, prosperity, celebrity, and a hundred and one other culturally sanctioned distractions. This is why the passage from Mark's Gospel in which Jesus is shown dissociating himself from his immediate family occurs where it does, in the Aries section of the Gospel, which would have been read and discussed at this time of the year, when the very trees and flowers around us are emerging from winter's collective homogeneity and beginning to express their individuality and uniqueness. 'Doing the will of God' does not mean behaving yourself, going to church on Sunday, living a respectable life; it means discovering and expressing the unique and precious part that only you can play in the great drama of existence. 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' asks Jesus. He goes on, 'Those who do the will of God are my mother, my sisters and my brothers,' by which he did not mean that his biological family were disreputable people – they were probably anything but - but that true nurture can only be provided by those who have themselves broken away from the Collective They, and who are concerned to help you find your authentic, creative, unique self.

The Jews tell of a certain Rabbi Susya who used to say, 'When I die, God will not ask me why I wasn't Abraham, or why I wasn't Moses; he will ask me why I wasn't Susya.' The same is true of you and me. The success or otherwise of my life will not be determined by how rich I become, or how famous I become, or how influential I become, or how popular I become. It will not even be assessed by how well I have kept the rules, or how closely I have emulated the life of some great spiritual figure. God will not ask me why I haven't been another Jesus, or another Francis of Assisi. He will ask me why I allowed my inherited cultural and religious prejudices, and my desire for conformity and respectability, to prevent me from becoming Bill Darlison.

### Chapter One Notes

i Cooke, p 4

ii Since this sermon was delivered Christopher Hitchens has entered the fray with his book 'God is not Great'. Hitchens is an Aries, too, born April 13<sup>th</sup> 1949.

iii Mark 1:20

iv Ballou, p 81

v 2 Corinthians 6:2

vi Mark 7:27

vii John 15:14

viii Matthew 10:34-38

ix Rinpoche, p 127

