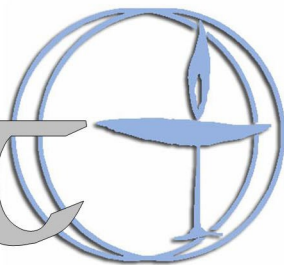


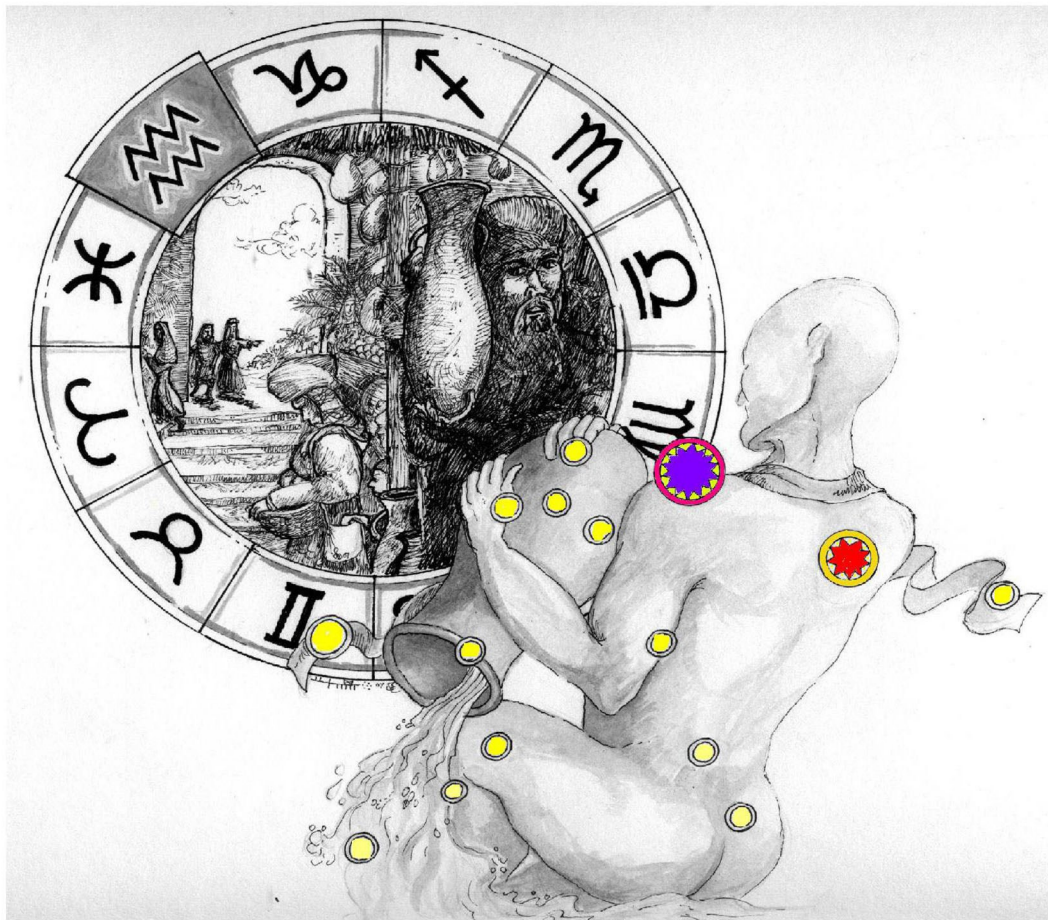
Oscailt



October 2023

IRELANDS UNITARIAN MAGAZINE

Vol.19 Nº 10



City Walks

The last in the series of *Summer Walks* and history organised by Rory Delany, took place on Sunday 3rd September.

Walk to Ranelagh and on to the area of Lower Rathmines.

Below a picture of those that participated.





Oscailt since January 2005 has become the monthly magazine for Irish Unitarians. Originally it was the calendar for Dublin but due to popular demand by non members this new format was born and continues to grow and flourish.

Oscailt is Published by the
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Our magazine title, **Oscailt**, is inspired by the account of the **Healing of the Deaf and Mute Man** in St. Mark's Gospel, Chapter 7. Jesus commands the mans ears to open up with Aramic word "Ephphatha" - open ! The Irish word *oscailt*, (from the verb *oscail*, to open), means an opening, or, metaphorically, it could mean a revelation or a beginning.

An Original Thinker

Some years ago Rev. Bill Darlison gave Paul a computer he no longer used - Bill likes to keep up to date with technology. Recently doing a clear out we thought it time to bring Bill's old computer to be recycled. Before doing so Paul cleared the files. Among these files I found addresses Bill gave in Dublin over a period of about five years. Re-reading these made me realise afresh what an original thinker Bill is and how blessed we were to have him in Dublin. It was quite eerie to read some of the things Bill wrote seventeen years ago- particularly from the present perspective.

Bill is an academic, he is interested in languages – not every-day useful languages like French or Spanish. Bill learned, Latin, Ancient Greek and after his retirement he studied Hebrew. He is passionately interested in the Bible he still reads it every day. He begins the Old Testament on the first of January each year, he reads three chapters each week-day and five chapters each on Saturday and Sunday. In this way he finishes it on New Year's Eve. Bill has read the New Testament in the original Greek and since retirement he is studying the Old Testament as written in Hebrew. Bill has been interested in Astrology for many years. Bill combined his knowledge and his passions in his preaching. This earned Bill the title "The Elvis of the Pulpit."

(see back cover, Rev. Bill Darlison published "THE GOSPEL and the ZODIAC" 2007)

As I was thinking about this service over the past week or so, by co-incidence I was sent a joke. There is a copy of it on the table if anyone wants to see it. The cartoon shows Moses and God exchanging the following.

God shouts down to Moses: "Listen, the truth is way too technically advanced for your people right now. We'll write it down as allegory. They're savvy enough to get the essential message.

Moses: But what if one day they lose that savvy and revert to a literal reading?

God replies: C'mon, how likely is that to happen?"

We have our roots in the Christian Bible; **if** we read the Bible, we interpret it as allegory or metaphor. We use reason when reading it, we make allowances for the time and culture in which it was written. Those who read it literally may accuse Unitarians of riding roughshod over God's Holy Word. Bill will never be accused of taking a literal approach to the Bible. Bill went a step beyond allegory when he shared his belief that the Bible and particularly the Gospel of Mark is an astrological guide.

For anyone whose only knowledge of astrology is the horoscopes cast by mystic Meg - regarding the Bible as a work of astrology will seem like blasphemy. However, in the past astrology was a science. It was a science with ancient roots, it was developed by people who knew the stars and understood the movements of the planets through the heavens. It is a guide to the human condition. Sadly, a great deal of the knowledge of astrology is now lost.

Yet reading Bill's addresses I have to say that there may well be truth in Bill's theory. To clarify my position, I have never studied astrology but life experiences make me keep an open mind. If you don't believe that planets can influence human behaviour then just consider, the Moon together with the rotation of the earth causes the tides we on Earth experience twice every day. That is one firm example of how planets influence life.

This morning I will not be putting an astrological interpretation on the Gospel. I will bring your attention to some familiar stories within the Judeo-Christian traditions and highlight how these stories may have astrological connections.

I am assuming that everyone is familiar with the Gospel stories.

Where are twelve constellations in the Zodiac. Aries, Capricorn, Leo and so on. These constellations are spread across the sky. Because of a 'wobble' in the earth's axis on the first day of the spring equinox the sun appears in a slightly different position in relation to the constellation. This movement means that every two thousand years approximately the sun enters a different Constellation. The earth travels in that Constellation for just over two thousand years. Currently the earth has moved from the constellation of Pices into the constellation of Aquarius. This is the age of Aquarius. The change is gradual. It is possible to align historical change with

the change of the ages. I will give an outline of some of the changes in the past. And share Bill's thoughts on what the Age of Aquarius might mean.

In the ancient Jewish tradition. God gave Moses the commandments on mount Sinai - this was to be the new covenant between God and his people. On the night the Jews left Egypt they sprinkled the blood of a lamb on their door posts so that God's vengeance would pass over Jewish homes. Remember the story of Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice his son to God. When God spared the boy, Abraham looked up and saw a ram in the thicket. Lamb is the central food at all Passover meals. The symbol of this new faith or covenant was the lamb. The ram is the symbol of Aries. The Jews were meant to embrace the new order symbolised by the Ram or lamb.

While Moses was on the mountain the people became discontent. They wanted to return to Egypt where "at least their bellies were filled". The Jews wanted to go back to the old life. They built a Golden Calf.

The Bull is the symbol of Taurus. The age of Taurus was ending and the new age of Aries was beginning. The Bull had to give way to the Ram. By honouring the Golden Calf the Jews were looking backward to the past. Life never goes backwards.

About two thousand years later the age of Aries gave way to the Age of Pices. Whose symbol is the fish. Jesus began his ministry by choosing twelve disciples. He chose fishermen and told them they would be "fishers of men". The earliest Christian symbol was the 'fish', not the Cross. The Bishop's hat is in the shape of a fish's mouth. There are two accounts in the Gospels where Jesus feeds the multitudes with bread and 'fish'. After his resurrection on the road to Emmaus Jesus shared a meal with the disciples. This Jewish gathering did not share the lamb of their faith, but they ate 'fish'.

We are told that Jesus promised to be with his people until the end of the age. The end of the "Age" this quote is often misquoted as being the end of the world. The age of Pices is passed. This is the age of Aquarius. Is it a co-incidence that Christianity in all its forms is facing exceptional challenges?

I will look at some of what Bill wrote seventeen years ago about what this new age may bring.

The watercarrier is the symbol of Aquarius. A man carries the water. We who get our water from the tap forget that carrying water has always been and still is the work of women and children in many countries. Men do not carry water. The symbol of Aquarius - the man carrying water- signifies a blurring of gender roles. In 2008 Bill wrote of the new age. It will be a time of “human-centred religion, technological and communications revolution, ecological awareness; changes of patterns in primary relationships, egalitarianism”. The age of individuality.

In bookshops it is becoming unusual to see a section specifically dedicated to “Religion” there are however shelves devoted to books labelled “Mind, body Spirit.” Lots of books about reading tarot cards or crystals and how to connect with your chakras or contact your angel.

Technology and communications have been revolutionised but even in 2008 Artificial Intelligence seemed to be a pipe dream. A current problem a Primary school principals is the use of “smart phones among young children”.

Ecological awareness – we are beginning to wake up. We are witnessing climate change. Watching the northern hemisphere burn this summer the Watercarrier came to my mind. In country after country men carried water in trucks, on their backs and in air planes and helicopters as they tried to control wildfires.

Meanwhile at the same time, in Spain, Greece, Japan and other countries floods devastated the country. Here we just had far too much rain. Pundits predict that the next war will be over water not oil.

Who would ever have believed that Irish people would regularly carry a bottle of water with them. In 2016 in Ireland 152 million litres of bottled water were sold. We are all watercarriers.

Changes in patterns of primary relationships. Around 1998 the managing committee of this church - after some discussion - agreed that the Gay Men’s choir would be welcome to hold a carol service in this church. This church now host an annual service for the Transgender community. At that first service there were sixteen attendees now we have sixty or seventy in church for the evening.

In 2008 who would have believed that within nine years Ireland would pass the Marriage Equality Act. We are proud to offici-

ate at same sex weddings, we have had many baby welcoming services where both parents are the same gender.

In 2008 who had heard the expression “gender fluid” or “non Binary”. In 2008 I bet none of us had ever been asked which is your preferred pronouns? Blurring of gender roles.

Bill certainly brought a new perspective to the Bible. But what does this mean? Is this information useful?

I see it as a reminder that we look beyond the outward trappings of religion to the teachings that all religions hold in common.

Be kind, love one another, you are part of a web of life, respect life, live consciously- do not sleep your way through life. Accept change because change is the nature of life.

Or as Bill put it back then - “ The Bible contains a warning for those who constantly look backwards: like Lot’s wife in the Book of Genesis, they turn into pillars of salt”.

Rev. Bridget Spain

Minister Dublin Unitarian Church

Visit to the Synagogue in Rathgar
on Saturday 13th October 2023

Details from the minister

“A Song On The Ocean Wave”

I recently had the great pleasure to attend the annual meetings of the Unitarian Music Society at the Nightingale Centre in Great Hucklow.

Instituted many years as a fun way to merge the society's annual business meeting and an opportunity to make some music together, the weekend has developed to place a focus on rehearsing and performing a “major work”. Recent years have included *Trial By Jury* by Gilbert & Sullivan, *Dido And Anaes* by Henry Purcell, and *Gloria* by Antonio Vivaldi. In these instances, anyone who plays an instrument rehearses with the orchestra and anyone who sings joins the choir - if you do both, you can choose. The society is in a transitory phase at the moment after the passing of its much-loved president, David Dawson, in 2021. This has resulted in something of a changing of the guard and an ushering in of many new ideas about what to do over the weekend.

At last year's AGM, we decided to try something new, setting aside the major work and to develop a performance based on a theme instead. To this end, the theme “A Song On The Ocean Wave” and all rehearsals and breakout sessions were encouraged to follow the theme. A programme of sea-shanties, sea-ballads, folk songs, classical songs referencing the sea and popular song was put together in arrangements by Marianna Michell, Marcie McGaughey and Ben Applequist, all members of the society. All part of the passing of time and different people having different talents - it is great to learn from experience. After some testing rehearsals, the performance was great and we were delighted to be joined by some UMS members who were unable to join the weekend who came and provided a small and exclusive audience for us.

This weekend happens every year, usually at the second weekend in August. Next years' conference will be Friday 9th to Monday 12th August 2024. I highly recommend it to members of our congregation who are interested in playing, thinking, talking about music. Please do reach out to me if you would like any further information.

Unitarian Music Society - Derbyshire, England - August 2023

Josh Johnston

The Beyondness of Understanding

A question endures for me; why are the scriptures, our books of faith, full of dreadful stories of death, judgment, condemnation, unbelievable acts of men and contradictions. The gospels are full of contradictions - it seems just beyond my understanding. Many of us here were born and grew up in a christian church. We were told bible stories and then the rules followed, the doctrines and dogma. We are here today, in a church that rejects dogma and doctrine - let me rephrase that - we don't have a doctrines or dogmas.

I found this place - then I continued coming to this place because I sought a community, a space in the week where I can freely explore the questions that intrigue and fascinate me. Heraclitus about 500 years before the Common Era said that 'No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.' I feel that about here - we don't step into the same church twice. We do not hear the same readings year after year; our thoughts and ideas are free from doctrine, are free of filter bubbles and don't require the imprimatur of the minister or god help us, the managing committee.

Biblical Exegesis is a theological study. It is about expanding, amplifying and shining light on what is in the actual text of the bible, almost line-by-line. It's from the Greek 'to lead out.' Another definition is 'the critical interpretation of a biblical text to discover its intended meaning.' That presumes the biblical text is not immediately clear, it requires some wise and scholarly man or institution to 'lead out' for us. So much of mainstream religious institutions use exegesis to educate their followers. And it is the institution, and usually the men who interpret for the people what bible is teaching us about what to believe, how to believe it.

Most Christian congregations/denominations have words from the Bible to define their mission, their beliefs, etc: or they will refer to the bible as the source of their mission.

The Baptists in Ireland say: "... go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."

The Presbyterians in Ireland say they are: "committed to bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to people of all ages across Ireland". The Catechism of the Catholic church has 848 pages. It begins with "God,



A place of worship since 1717

UNITARIAN CHURCH

Prince's Street, Cork.

Registered Charity Number 0000246

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www.unitarianchurchcork.com

**Jazz Vespers,
first Friday of the month @ 6pm.**

An ecumenical service with the Methodist church.

Please Note

If you are aware of any member of our community who is unwell, or who has suffered a bereavement, and who would welcome contact from others in the church, please e-mail Rev.Bridget Spain.

Vestry 01 - 4780638

e-mail: revbspain@gmail.com

Childrens Programme - Sunday Club

Takes place on the 2nd Sunday of each month

For any queries about Sunday Club, or to volunteer as a leader, please email Denise at sundayclubunitarianchurch@gmail.com

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

Lunch-time service every Wednesday from 1.10 to 1.40 p.m.

Each week Eileen Delaney sends an e-mail circular as to what is happening in the church and the other activities associated with the church.

If you would like to receive this information you should send your details requesting your name be added to the list to:-
eileendelaney76@gmail.com



Dublin Unitarian Church

112 St.Stephens Green Dublin 2.

Service 11.00a.m.

Sunday Rota for October 2023

1 st October	<i>Harvest Celebration</i>
Service	Rev.Bridget Spain
Reader	Denise Dunne
Flowers	Denise Dunne
Welcomers	Michael Robinson, Catharine Cook
Coffee	Gavin Byrne, Emer O'Reilly, Daniela Cooney

8 th October	
Service	Led by Shari McDade
Reader	Paul Murray
Flowers	Emer O'Reilly
Welcomers	Paula Mills, Emer O'Reilly
Coffee	Michael Robinson, Chris Quinn, Janet Mulroy

15 th October	<i>Wisdom Literature</i>
Service	Rev.Bridget Spain
Reader	Denis Conway
Flowers	Paula Mills
Welcomers	Kevin O'Hara, Doireann Ni Bhriain
Coffee	Paula Mills, Maeve Edwards, Denis Conway

22 nd October	<i>Why are people so Angry ?</i>
Service	Rev.Bridget Spain
Reader	Elaine Harris
Flowers	Elaine Harris
Welcomers	Denis Conway, Tony Brady
Coffee	Lorraine Doyle, Pat Redmond, Karen O

29 th October	<i>Favourite Readings & Music</i>
Service	Rev.Bridget Spain
Reader	Various
Flowers	Denise Dunne
Welcomers	Colette Douglas, Lorraine Doyle
Coffee	A Connolly Crangle, Jane Nolan, Catharine Cook

Services are broadcast live from the church each Sunday at 11a.m.
On our WebCam, click and connect at www.dublinunitarianchurch.org

Recordings of previous services are also available on the website.

LOVE IS THE DOCTRINE OF THIS CHURCH
THE QUEST OF TRUTH IS ITS SACRAMENT
AND SERVICE IS ITS PRAYER.

TO DWELL TOGETHER IN PEACE
TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE IN FREEDOM
TO SERVE MANKIND IN FELLOWSHIP
TO THE END THAT ALL SOULS SHALL GROW IN HARMONY
WITH THE DIVINE
THIS DO WE COVENANT WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH GOD.

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23, Ireland.
Unitarian Church - Dublin Registered Charity Number 20000622

Service: Sunday at 11a.m. Phone: Vestry 01-4780638

Managing committee:- Chairperson: Denise Dunne;
Vice Chairman: Dennis Aylmer; Secretary: Trish Webb-Duffy; Treasurer: Rory Delany;
Tony Shine; Andy Pollak; Peter White; Will O'Connell; Collette Douglas;
Malachy Hevehan; Paul Murray; Madeline Stringer; Gavin Byrne.

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Treasurer: Rory Delany: 087-2217414,

e-mail: treasurerunitarianchurch@gmail.com

Musical Director: Josh Johnston :- 086 892 0602

Caretaker: Kevin Robinson

Telephone: 4752781

Recordings of the church services are available on the church website.

infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life”.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (from 1647) begins with a list of the accepted books of holy scripture. And it says: “Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable” - God committed to writing, “which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary”. So even though God is revealed in the wonder of creation, he still chose to commit to writing so that we would have a full understanding of God and how we are to live our lives. It’s worth mentioning that many of the people who brought this community to this day - refused to sign up to this confession of faith - it imposed a rigid and fixed doctrine upon christian people; the early unitarians or nonconformists wanted the freedom to question and challenge this dogma. Church and state collaborated to imprison and punish those who did not adhere to these confessions. Our own Rev Thomas Emlyn spent time in prison here in Dublin for not subscribing to the doctrine of the trinity.

Unitarians such as William Ellery Channing in the early 19th century makes strident arguments on why we should use our reason when reading scripture. He says the books were written in circumstances vastly different from our own. They have contradictions, lots of them. Here’s how he puts it: “To all who hear me, I would say, with the Apostle, Prove all things, hold fast that which is good. Do not, he said, shrink from the duty of searching God’s Word for yourselves, through fear of human censure and denunciation”. He goes on to express his view that there is ‘an impure union between church and state to promote what he called ‘the spirit of intolerance’ .He calls us to do this so that we will achieve a ‘decline of prejudice and bigotry’ on which he blames mainstream christianity with it’s hierarchies, dogma and doctrine. He wrote these words in 1819.

So where does this 21st century Unitarian stand? - we have a text that we value and say often in Church - love is the doctrine of this church.

This simple and short text outline the basics - the Doctrine - the Sacrament - the Prayer. Christianity is our foundation, our history, our memory. We don't read the Bible here very often or quote from it. Because it is not the only source of wisdom, or the only place where God speaks to us. Jesus did quote scripture, a bit - 'you have heard it said an eye for eye, but I say...love, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' .He quoted it to contradict it, or explain how the leaders misinterpreted it. Like a radical preacher or prophet he says, forget what you've been told by your holy men - the stuff in those books written in the past. Repent said the mad fella by the river - think differently. Metanoia is the greek word - a transformative change of mind or beyond the mind. This unitarian from the very first Sunday I walked in here heard a clear message: wisdom, revelation or whatever we call it, comes from many sources: from Buddhism, Judaism, humanism, christianity in all its forms and practices, science, literature...and you can add your own to that list.

I wrote two quite different dramatic musical takes on the life of Jesus - in them, I explored Jesus relationships. I paid particular attention to his relationships with the religious authority of the time as well lesser know characters such as Nicodemus, the woman at the well. It was a difficult task because of the contradictions, the different accounts of similar stories. What do I dramatise, what do I leave out? The contradictions allowed for creativity, imagination.

I thought, imagine if Matthew, Mark, Luke and John collaborated. Now they didn't - we know that. Paul's letters were first to be written, about year 50. Mark came next, in the mid 60s, Luke in the late 80s and John about year 100 of the common era. But Matthew, Luke and John probably had access to Mark's work. Back to imagining their collaboration:

So they start a google doc, and a WhatsApp group. Now remember that the gospels were written between 60 and 100 years after the death of Jesus. And they are not believed to be written by eyewitnesses. And throughout 1st century Palestine, you'd hear Greek, Aramaic, and Latin spoken; Jesus spoke Aramaic - the gospels were written in Greek.

Matthew: Hey John. How r u. Love your work. Just thinking you start a bit heavy.

Luke: Hey Matt, we have to get together to talk through the nativity - probably best done offline bro.

John: What's up boys, I really think we should start 'at the beginning'. Mark: Miracles lads, let focus on the miracles.

At 3:16, John pipes up: Guys, I have it...and you know the rest. "God so loved the world..."

The Gospels, the account given to us of the life of Jesus and his companions were written by different people, at different times. They were agreed by christian leaders 300 years after the death of Jesus. There are other accounts, other books that didn't make it into the canon.

Back to the contradictions. In the Gospel of John, we see Jesus talking about himself - he says 'I am the bread of life...the light of the world...the way the truth the life.' In Mark, Jesus is talking about the coming kingdom - he doesn't talk about himself. This tells us that the authors had different perspectives - and of course the different times they were writing in. Mark's Jesus isn't into talking about himself, but John's Jesus - he's always talking about himself - his identity, where he comes from. There are all kinds of historical problems there - if Jesus did speak about himself all the time, why did Mark, Matthew or Luke leave it out?

What we can say, I suppose, is that much of what Jesus said or did was contrary to Jewish teaching or practice at the time. He argued with the religious teachers; he made friends with the shunned and hated, he broke bread with them - showing them love, compassion, empathy, and he healed them on the sabbath. In one of my dramatic retellings of the life of Jesus, I gave Nicodemus a voice. And he tells the story of Jesus from his perspective. He doesn't have much to say in the New Testament - he only appears in John's gospel. Here's how he introduces himself towards the end of his life, in my reimagining:

"My name is Nicodemus; some speculate I am related to the boy. Perhaps, his uncle, grandfather. I am like a priest, a pharisee, one of the teachers of the Israelites.

I want to share a story about a man - an extraordinary man. I first met him when he was a boy - he would come to the temple and challenge our understanding of the law and of life. To me, he was looking for the truth - he spent his time hanging around the sick, the diseased, the homeless, the worthless, and the most hated fools - he gathered around him, trusted friends, believers and together they went about preaching something very new, very dangerous.

The older men in the temple declared war on Jesus. They did not like what he claimed to be true but I listened to him. And I sought him out to find out for myself, was he a prophet from God, or a crazed fool with nothing but a death wish. We became close friends and I did what I could to defend him.

And he goes on: You see, the Jews expected a Messiah to overthrow the Romans – if Jesus was the Messiah, he had other plans. They read all the holy books – they were wrong. Jesus was here to overthrow hatred, wherever it appeared.

And his finishes with: This is my account of the story. Whether or not you believe it is not important. For what he did and achieved as a young man will inspire generations - where that inspiration leads, is your story. And I have Nicodemus appear throughout the piece, advising Jesus to tone it down and appealing to his betters to listen to him.

Jesus is, arguably, different from all the faith leaders or religious founders who walked among us throughout the ages. He was revolutionary.

Abraham was busy producing offspring to establish the 7 tribes of Israel, Moses led a great freedom movement. The gospel writers spend time linking Jesus with the prophetic texts of the Old Testament - that his birth, life and death was prophesied.

Jesus was the revolutionary - he was a rebel and trouble-maker. He was the very personification of compassion, of care, of love. He isn't shown here with a halo because this representation shows a man, a human being. Unitarians do not hold that Jesus was God. The word 'Inspiration' is attached to him. For me, that 'inspiring' man is connected to our wayside pulpit outside when in June, we put up a poster with 'Love is the doctrine of this church' printed on the pride colours. That 'inspiration' is attached to the work members of this congregation do for others who need love, compassion and practical help. It speaks to our acceptance and tolerance, our drive to explore the wisdom given to us by women and men of other faiths and none.

In the summer of 2017, (I think), I first started coming to this church. I heard the minister say that Unitarians questioned the divinity of Jesus - now we don't deny the divinity of anyone, (as Jennifer Flegg pointed out to me recently). But when I heard that, spoken in this church, from this pulpit, my ears pricked up - I wondered, is this the beginning of a brand new faith or spiritual journey for me? And you know, it was.

And I am drawn to dissent, I am drawn to questioning all that I have been told; in school, in church - that which offends my soul, I will reject; to follow the example Walt Whitman gave us.

So now, things were beginning to not be beyond my understanding - if Jesus was perhaps, not God, and God is unity, not trinity - we use our reason, follow our conscience - and be totally free and supported in our beliefs as with our non beliefs - and embrace new ways of thinking. Karen Armstrong, in *The Case for God* says that while we might employ our reason and try and explain everything, there is a delight, she says, in unknowing, the contemplation of the insoluble is a source of joy, astonishment and contentment. The human mind has an ability to have ideas and experiences that exceed reason.

The Beyondness of Understanding is for me, acknowledging that which we can't quite explain - we value science and reason in our faith journey - I accept there are things beyond my understanding and I'm content with that. And I'm grateful for this community with people to accompany me and teach me on that journey.

But I believe the secret to life, the meaning of life is love. It might be beyond understanding but it's not beyond experience. In your exegesis, always look for love.

Finally; Faith is a fine invention, says Emily Dickson, but microscopes are required in emergencies. She also suggested that we sometimes need fantastic notions or theories or mysteries. This is her tiny poem 'To Make a Prairie'-

"To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee, One clover, and a bee.

And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few."

Gavin Byrne

Dublin Unitarian Book Club's choice for August 2023.

Amy and Isabelle *by Elizabeth Strout*

This story is set in the 1960's in the small fictitious Town of Shirley Falls in New England. It is a stiflingly hot summer when the river which divides the town looks like "a dead brown snake". The river also divides the town by class, rich and poor, and to an extent religion Oyster Point houses the wealthy professional WASP society, and Basin Falls the working classes.

This is where fifteen years previously the young Isabelle Goodrow goes to live with her baby daughter Amy. She rents a house on the periphery of Oyster Point. She says she is a widow and she goes to work in the office of the local Mill which is owned by Avery Clarke. Isabelle never quite fits in with either community, she yearns for respectability but also human connection and love. She carefully brings up Amy, sheltering her from the realities of life so that Amy too is in a lonely place. She grows up to be a shy introverted teenager not quite fitting in and she too longs for connection and understanding. Amy has beautiful long curly blonde hair which draws her some attention. When the replacement Maths teacher Mr. Robertson starts in her school it is this feature that he comments on first and then as he starts to pay Amy more attention and she succumbs to his charms. He starts to give her lifts home and groom her into an inappropriate relationship. This is a very uncomfortable read but the author does show how such things can happen.

Isabelle is now the mill owner Avery Clarke's secretary whom she has developed a crush on, but he is married. Isabelle does not mix freely with the other women in the office as she sees them as one step below her. They can be a raucous bunch, a bit crude and outspoken especially Fat Bev the astute but kind peacemaker. Tensions increase in the office just as the heat of the summer increases and rivalries and disputes erupt. Bev's friend Dottie is out on sick leave and Isabelle has arranged for Amy to work as a temp during her absence.

School has finished and Mr. Robertson drives Amy home, stopping off at a side road they often frequent. They are caught in a compromising act by Avery Clarke, who discloses what he has seen to Isabelle. Naturally Isabelle is shocked and ashamed by this even though Avery says he will keep it to himself. Isabelle's reaction is quite brutal as she chops off Amy's hair with clippers. There is a huge rift between mother and daughter and this is even more evident as they start to work with each other at the mill, the rift is picked up on by Fat Bev.

As Isabelle contemplates her life we find out that she too had been

groomed by an older married man, her father's friend Jake whom she fell pregnant by. Her father had died but her mother supported her and Amy until she too died, so Isabelle had to sell up and she moved to Shirley Falls, hiding her past and burying her aspirations to go to college and become a teacher, she has a major inferiority complex over her lack of education.

There are other happenings in Shirley Falls and surrounding area. A girl has gone missing from her home, supposedly kidnapped. The so called respectable society Isabelle longs to be accepted by is full of hypocrisies as there are extra marital affairs, teenage pregnancies, even UFO sightings, lots of secrets and lies. All is not perfect behind the white picket fences.

Isabelle confronts Mr. Robertson and makes sure he leaves town. Amy is devastated and feels betrayed when she phones him as he is dismissive and wishes her a good future life, but without him.

One night Fat Bev and Dottie turn up at Isabelle's house asking if they can stay the night as Dottie's husband is leaving her for a younger woman and she doesn't want to be at home. The three women had already bonded over a previous incident so now Isabelle feels she can talk about her past and so reveals all. They encourage Isabelle to tell Amy the truth. Instead of rejection Isabelle finds kindness and acceptance from Bev and Dottie and when she tells Amy she too does not reject her mother and is not angry but excited as she discovers she has three half siblings. Isabelle makes contact with Amy's other family hoping to make amends to Jake's wife with an apology, Jake is now dead but his wife and children are willing to meet Amy. So life goes on but not as before, both Amy and Isabelle have to grow up and accept their new realities.

The book club readers had mixed views on this book. It was the Author's first novel (1998) and she has since developed and honed her craft in her subsequent novels especially with including male characters with more nuance and likeability, her female characters are always complex but identifiable if not always liked.

A 50/50 recommendation for Strout's first novel from the book club, but an author who is always worth reading.

Alison Claffey

CULTURE NIGHT

Culture Night this year featured a very diverse range of music. To start with, we were treated to a captivating performance by Cezar Oranski and Liezl-Maret Jacobs. They played Sonata for clarinet and piano by Camille Saint Sans and the Verdi Bassi Concert Fantasy from Rigoletto. Both Cezar and Liezl-Maret are members of the classical musicians meet-up group who meet regularly in the church.

Mark McCrystal, organ scholar from Trinity College and Christina Troop from the Royal Irish Academy, (aged 11 years), gave us Bach and Vivaldi. They both remarked how much they loved playing our organ and the audience loved them. (*See Pictures*)

The Culwick Choral Society then took us through a musical journey from the high renaissance music of Tallis to an arrangement of The Parting Glass by Eoin Conway. In between we had choral music by Mozart, Farmer and Moore.

The programme ended with Ukrainian organ student, Olesia Barsook. She began with two spring songs by Ukrainian composer Lesia Dychko, creating an intriguing sound that drew everyone's attention. Olesia went on to share music from the Irish renaissance. She also gave us a rare performance of the music of Ukrainian contemporary composer Svyatoslav Lunyov. She played his Libera Me. Finally, Olesia played Litanies by Jean Alain. A number of young people in the audience asked for more of this music from these wonderful musicians.

Culture Night this year was exciting - the diversity of the music, musicians and audience was very special. When our doors opened at 6.30pm, I started counting the numbers coming in. I couldn't keep up. Thanks to everyone who brought this evening together and to those who welcomed people to the church, showed them to seats and told stories about the church. You ensured that our over 620 visitors experienced a truly Dublin Unitarian welcome.

Gavin Byrne

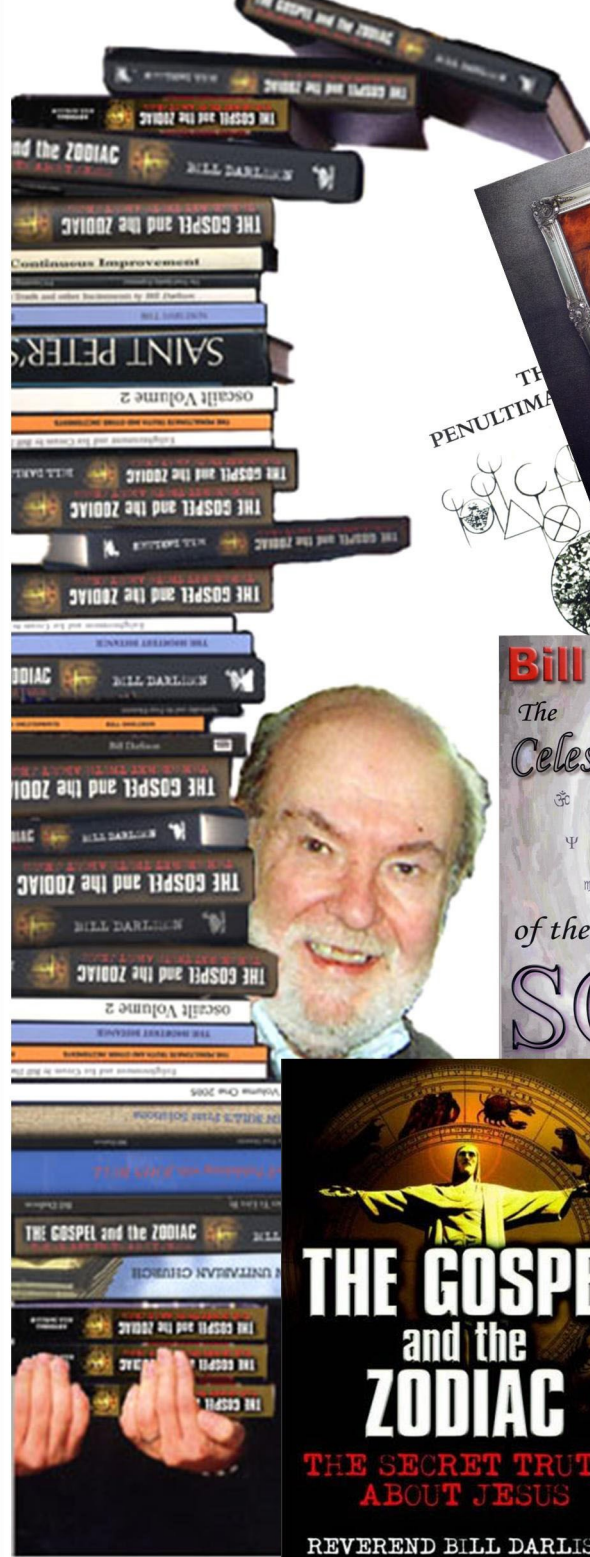


CULTURE NIGHT

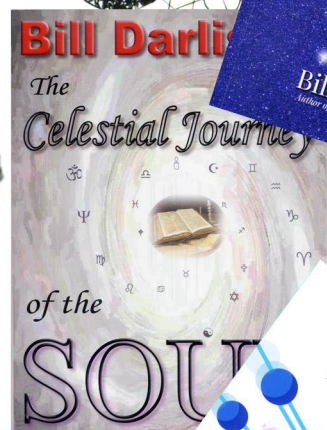
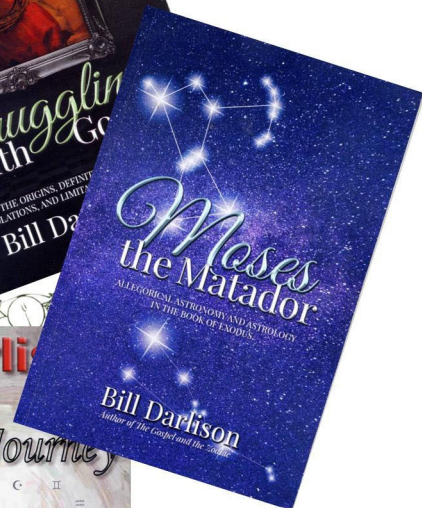
Mark McCrystal, organ scholar from Trinity College, and Christina Troop from the Royal Irish Academy, (aged 11 years),



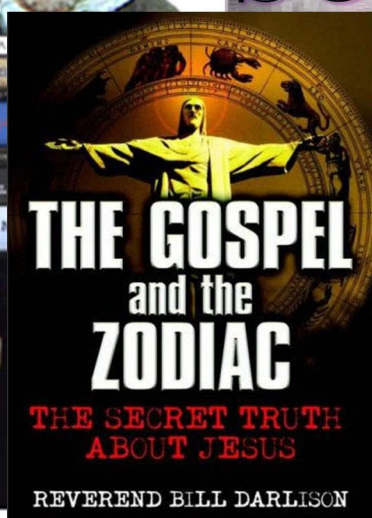
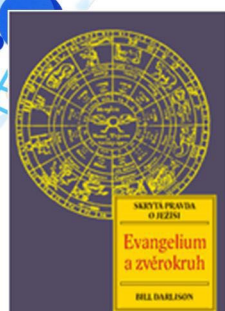
Culwick Choral Society



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