

Gospel for 2nd before Advent: Mark 13: 1-8

Even with Sat Nav, negotiating the road from York to Scarborough by night with the A64 shut at week-ends isn't always easy. When the diversion signs give up at Stamford Bridge (Hastings 274 miles – 'You're on your own now, Harold!') staring at the night sky hoping for a star to guide you to Scarborough, if not to righteousness, can be a risky business.

Because you just can't trust a planet, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune: they're there all right, bright lights if not the brightest lights in the sky. But you just can't trust them to get you home. They wander about all over the place, fizzling randomly, like a member of Teresa May's cabinet, firecrackers gone walkabout.

'Take care that no one leads you astray' Jesus warns in our Gospel today. 'Many will come and say "I am he." 'The time is near... ...Do not go after them.'

The word Jesus uses for lead astray is *πλαναω*, from which we get the word planet, Greek for deceiver. Not the planet Mercury but the deceiver Mercury; the deceiver Venus; the deceiver Mars; the deceiver Jupiter; the deceiver Saturn; the deceiver Uranus; the deceiver Neptune.

Except that deceit like beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The track of the planets may look haphazard from our viewpoint on earth, but that is based on the false assumption that we are the centre of the solar system. We are definitely not. If your satellite navigation system really went haywire – and mine's never recovered from navigating the South Wales valleys where all place names begin with ll - and you found yourself with your engine overheating, sitting right on top of the sun, the path of the planets would not be haphazard but would seem entirely regular elliptical orbits like a ball on a string whizzing around your head.

And four of the planets, the gas giants Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune in their part of space town are the leading ladies, the prima donnas, the Marias of the Sound of Music with the faraway sun reduced to a minor role, the squeaky third nun from the left in the choir, just a pin-prick on the horizon.

For instance Jupiter is the biggest planet in the solar system. It gives out more heat than it receives, like parliament or the General Synod. 1300 earths could fit into it and there'd still be room. Its mass is two and a half times the rest of the planets put together.

Its gravity is so powerful that it holds on to 16 moons, a veritable solar system of its own, twice as many things orbiting it as orbit the sun. The nearest, Metis is eighty thousand miles from its surface the furthest, Sinope is 148 million miles from its surface, one and a half times our distance from the sun. 15 out of 16 of its moons are named after the classical god Jupiter's lovers, a rare joke in Astronomy.

Its moon Io, about the same distance as our moon from earth, is the most volcanically active place in the solar system. It's like that because faraway Jupiter literally sucks magma from its core. Reminds me of my landlady in Middlesbrough who sucked the life out of all she encountered! That's some suction. Eat your heart out, Mr Dyson. So Jupiter is some deceiver.

Speaking of Jupiter's moons, Galileo got into terrible trouble with t' Church when he discovered the first four of them, because he'd found four heavenly bodies which definitely did not revolve around earth. With the obvious conclusion we are definitely not the centre of the show. And when you realise for the first time that yours truly is not the centre of the show, you have to look at everything very, very, very differently. I suppose the UK is desperately seeking a new centre for its show.

Which brings us back to those human planets those deceivers we encounter. Are they true deceivers, or is it just they are only erratic because we wrongly assume that yours truly is the centre of the show, the leading lady, the leading man. If for one glorious moment we move away from me, me, me and look at people from another centre, then they may seem very different people indeed; we may be able to see them as a glory rather than a threat. The planet Jupiter, rather than being a deceiver whose path tricks us, actually saves the earth by guzzling up or deflecting comets that would blow us to smithereens. A comet is a mere crumb to Jupiter; but a nuclear winter for us.

Can we have a creed for the day which asserts 'I am not the centre of the universe' and see others accordingly? For Christians that centre has to be Jesus Christ or we might just as well pack up. Can we see others as orbiting him rather than orbiting us?

Leonard Wilson Bishop of Singapore in the last World War was brutally tortured by the Japanese. Yet rather than seeing his torturers as fiends who had the audacity to attack this bishop - and we all know bishops are the centre of the Church's universe! - he saw his torturers with Christ beside them, redeeming them. Christ smoothing out and banishing the nationalistic nightmares that had been drummed into them as children, Christ calming and healing the hurt and the brutality, Christ shining into their darkness. Christ gently hammering home that neither the kingdom of Japan nor the kingdom of the British Empire nor the kingdom of the EU was the true kingdom. We seek the day when the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, and he shall reign, for ever and ever! Dare to see all this Brexit hiatus in another light: birth pangs for the true kingdom of Christ.

So the story goes, after the war when Leonard Wilson conducted his first confirmation in Singapore he put his hands on the head of one of the candidates and found himself looking into the eyes

of his former torturer. Yet both were looking to Christ, our true centre.

Take care that no one deceives you. Take more care though that you do not deceive yourself, and that you, yes, just another planet, if a rather glorious one, that you treasure those planets who cross your path who revolve like you around the same S-O-N, the sun of righteousness rising on our Christmas horizon, when the A64 to Scarborough is shut, to lead many to righteousness, as Daniel predicts, like the stars for ever and ever.