



4th Week of Easter 30th April/1st May 2023 – Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

“I have come that they may have life and have it to the full” (John 10.10)

I was starting to think about this Reflection on Tuesday this week, the Feast of St Mark, the Evangelist. It was an opportunity to share with people at morning Mass in Holy Family, Small Heath, my visit to Venice where the remains of St Mark are to be found in the magnificent Basilica there. An opportunity also to speak of the symbol of St Mark – the winged lion – that has its origins in the Book of Ezekiel and the Book of Revelation. The lion of St Mark is the symbol of the city of Venice and is to be found on the Bell Tower of the Basilica. The symbol relates to St Mark's description of John the Baptist's voice 'crying out in the wilderness' upon hearing the Word of God. His voice was said to have sounded like that of a roaring lion. When I reflected on the Gospel for the Feast it wasn't difficult to relate this to the proclamation of the Gospel for the day where Mark records the appearance of Jesus to the eleven after the Resurrection and saying *“Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation”*. More and more we are conscious of the importance of every member of our Congregations being part of this. On Wednesday this week I was meeting with the Chaplain to Tamil speakers from Tamil Nadu in India and Sri Lanka. A lay leader was with him: the role of the laity in facilitating and gathering the people in this case is vital if the Chaplain is to be able to proclaim the Gospel at their monthly Mass and to encourage families to be more involved in their local parishes. The symbol of the lion, a figure of courage and monarchy is not inappropriate as the Christian needs to be courageous in proclaiming the Faith in a more secular world.

On the Fourth Sunday of Easter the Gospel is from St John; the same is true of all years in the Liturgical Cycle. The symbol for St John in iconography is the eagle, the king of the birds, a figure of the sky, and believed by Christian scholars to be able to look into the sun. John begins with an eternal overview of Jesus the Logos and goes on to describe many things with a “higher” Christology than the other three Gospels; it represents Jesus's Ascension and Christ's divine nature. This symbolises that Christians should look on eternity without flinching as they journey towards their goal of union with God.

The focus in the Gospel of St John on the Fourth Sunday is the Parable of the Good Shepherd. The image of the Shepherd and lambs is very appealing, especially at this time of year when most of us are likely to see little lambs scampering in the fields, even if it's just from the car window. The Shepherds are not so much in evidence though: it is an image that entered Jewish Theology as a Template of God, and from a country that was very rugged: the grassland was patchy, there were rocks and crags, not at all like

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our neat, ordered green fields. The Shepherd had to be totally committed to the flock, ready to protect the sheep from wolves and rustlers. That is why Jesus speaks of himself as the ‘good shepherd’ who ‘lays down his life for his sheep’. The voice of the Shepherd was important for the sheep in an era when there were no sheepdogs or the whistles we see used today in sheepdog trials.

One of the questions we have to put to ourselves today is whether we are listening out for the voice of the Shepherd; we can be so involved in so many things, even in very good actions, that we don’t hear the Shepherd’s call. Central in being conscious of the voice of the Shepherd are God’s Word and the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Many have moved away from the shepherding of the Church and they won’t find it “on the edge or in the stars” writes Joseph Pollard in his commentary “Finding Fresh Light”.

The image of Jesus as the Shepherd who is the “gate of the sheepfold” seems very relevant in this context, and points to a key dimension of the Priestly Vocation on Good Shepherd Sunday. Ferlita in his commentary speaks of different types of sheepfold, one being “an open space in the wilderness enclosed by a circle of piled up rocks”. And the gate – the gate is the shepherd himself. Yes the shepherd “lays down across the opening” to stop any thief or wild animal from entering. This is what Jesus has in mind when he says: “I am the gate”. Jesus described himself in contrast to religious leaders who did not have the true wellbeing of their people at heart.

The account we have had in the media this past week of the “Christians” in Kenya who have been starving themselves in order to enter the Kingdom of God reminds us that the task of the Church and its Shepherds to be “the gate” that protects the flock is a priority not to be ignored in our day too. The role of the Ethnic Chaplain in the Catholic Church is in part at least to safeguard his flock from predators, to be one who strives himself to follow Christ the Gate of the sheepfold.

It is indeed the task of the whole Catholic Community to never lose sight of the gate that is Christ Jesus, in the Church to which He has given this commission.

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