

Calvinist iconoclasts nearly destroyed it. The Emperor Joseph II admired it, but for the depictions of Adam and Eve, naked: he ordered them to be re-painted, suitably attired. French revolutionaries stole parts of it, and carted them off to Paris. Hitler captured it, and hid it in a salt mine in the mountains of Austria. I went by train to Ghent to see it; the tram drivers were on strike and repairs to the water mains all over the city centre meant the buses could not run, so I walked – three quarters of an hour – from the railway station to the Cathedral Church of S. Bavo. It was closed to the public for restoration, so I never saw it. But you, all of you, can see it, or at least a part of it, in reproduction of course, every time you enter or leave this Chapel of the Resurrection. (I believe that the restoration is now completed, so a return trip to Flanders is a priority.)

What is it? You have guessed the answer. It is the fifteenth-century masterpiece, *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck; and a copy of its lower central

panel is displayed in the cloister adjacent to the entrance in the south-west. The painting is inspired by verses from the fifth chapter of the Revelation to S. John the Divine, and the vision of the worship of heaven which they depict:

*And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing as though it had been slain...Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!"...And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshipped.<sup>1</sup>*

The Lamb, slaughtered before the foundation of the world, is Christ, the eternally begotten Son of God who took human nature upon himself at the Incarnation for the salvation of mankind and the redemption of the entire world. It is with this title, the Lamb of

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<sup>1</sup> cf Revelation 5: 6-14

God, that S John the Baptist identifies Our Lord at the inauguration of his public ministry. He does so not only once (as in the passage we have heard this morning) but twice in fact, in quick succession, the second time coming hard on the heels of the point at which today's Gospel ends. On this second occasion the Baptist's exclamation, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" prompts Andrew and a second, unnamed, disciple, to follow Jesus, to stay with Him, to recognise Him as the Messiah, the Christ, and to bring Peter to meet Him. Clearly this title, this appellation, 'Lamb of God,' is both theologically significant and evangelistically charged: it is both revealing and converting.

S John – the Evangelist this time, the writer of the Fourth Gospel – sets the first use of this rich and vital phrase on the lips of John the Baptist in the context of his account of the Baptism of Our Lord; or rather, to be precise, the nearest which the Fourth Gospel gets to an account of the Baptism of Our Lord. Careful listeners this morning, I'm sure there are one or two out there, will have noticed

that nowhere does S John the Evangelist state that the Baptist baptises Jesus; only that He, Jesus, is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit in the form of a dove, who descends on Jesus at his baptism in the accounts in each of the other three Gospels, is there, as is the Baptist himself, the one who baptises with water. It is enough to say that this is S John's version of Christ's baptism; and the baptism story, in this as in each of the Gospels, is fundamentally about the revelation of the identity of Our Lord, the revelation of who Jesus really is. Hence, for centuries in Western Christianity – and it remains true to this day in the East – the celebration of the mystery of Our Lord's baptism has been one with the celebration of the mystery of the coming of the Magi and that of the mystery of the miracle of water into wine at Cana in Galilee: the three great epiphanies of the one eternal truth, that Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem, worshipped by the wise men, baptised in the Jordan, the true Bridegroom of the Bride, is none other than the eternally existing Word, the everlasting Son of the Father. (And all of this, of course, is intimately connected with the

Christmas mystery itself – which is why we can get away with having Christmas music, today’s wonderful setting by Victoria, at this Mass which sees us, rather tediously, back in Ordinary Time.)

In the synoptic Gospels, S Matthew, S Mark, S Luke, the deep connexion between the Lord’s baptism and the revelation of who He truly is, is made through the words spoken by the Father: ***Thou art, in Matthew’s version, This is, my beloved Son.*** By these words we are to understand that Jesus is not simply – as in some liberal protestant theologies with their origins in nineteenth-century Germany – the friend of God, the adopted agent of God’s will and purposes, but rather that He is the one who ever dwells in the most intimate unity with his Father, and who shares the Father’s very substance and nature, as every son must. In the Fourth Gospel, we do not have the reference to the Beloved Son; but we do have the Lamb of God. As is so frequently the case, S John is giving us a kind of commentary, a deeper theological exposition, of the work of the first three evangelists. For if we are to understand the account of

the baptism of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels as a kind of type or prophecy of his death and resurrection, as surely we must (the Lord is plunged into the Jordan as he will be plunged into the tomb and Hades, and arises out of the waters as he will arise again from the grave to life eternal), then in S John's Gospel we are given the key to understanding what that *submerging* and *emerging*, that death and resurrection mean, and what they accomplish.<sup>2</sup> We need the second half of S John the Baptist's words as he points towards Our Lord. Jesus is not simply the Lamb of God, but the Lamb of God *who takes away the sin of the world*. Jesus is the new Passover Lamb, doing the work and fulfilling the office of the lambs killed to ensure the safe deliverance of the children of Israel from bondage and slavery in Egypt. Now that work and that office, patterned on that of the Jewish lamb of sacrifice but opening it up infinitely, enables the salvation of God to reach beyond one people, one time and one place, and to cascade everywhere and for always. Thus, as Isaiah

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<sup>2</sup> This theme is developed in Pope Benedict XVI's study *Jesus of Nazareth*, London 2007. See pp 20-22

has it, the salvation of God *may reach to the end of the earth*<sup>3</sup>. S Paul knows this, when he writes to the Christians in Corinth, *our Passover has been sacrificed – it is Christ!*<sup>4</sup> S Peter knows it, when he tells his audience, perhaps of the newly baptised, that they have been redeemed *by the precious blood [of Christ], as of a lamb, spotless and without blemish*<sup>5</sup>. S John returns to his own theme, reinforcing the symbolism in that intrinsically Johannine way, when, alone of the evangelists, he tells us in his account of Our Lord’s passion and death that the soldiers did not break the legs of Jesus that the scripture might be fulfilled, “Not a bone of him shall be broken.” The reference is to the twelfth chapter of Exodus in which we read that, likewise, not a bone is to be broken in the Passover lamb.

Before we are quite done with lambs and the Lamb – alas that there is no State Lunch today at which to continue the theme – we need to have another look at van Eyck’s painting of the

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 49:6 (from the first reading appointed for the Sunday.)

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 5:7 – in the fresh translation by Nicholas King SJ

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 1: 19. Ibid.

*Adoration.* I said that the painter, or painters, were *inspired* by the fifth chapter of Revelation; in fact, things have been taken a little further in the painting than the strict letter of the text would allow. The slain Lamb who is worshipped by saints and angels is not placed *between the throne and the four living creatures*, but rather is clearly standing atop an altar: and the altar is recognisably that of the Church's sacrifice. From the lamb's wounded side, blood pours directly into a chalice; it is the Precious Blood, the blood of the Eucharist. van Eyck has taken what is, in St John the Divine's book, explicitly an account of the worship of heaven, the heavenly liturgy, and made of it what is implicit, what is there as it were in code: the liturgy of the Eucharist here on earth. The painting thus teaches us that the worship of the Church on earth – and *par excellence* the celebration of the Mass which we are engaged upon even now – opens up a doorway into heaven and participates in what is heavenly. In our reproduction, the detail is vanishingly small. But study the original – when the authorities in Ghent will allow you – and you will see the way in which van Eyck *evokes in a particularly*

*potent way this interpenetration of heaven and earth in the Eucharistic liturgy*<sup>6</sup>. The angels are there, and the serried ranks of the saints, martyrs, confessors, even bishops; but the background is that of an actual, earthly built environment, with identifiable churches and other structures, and flowers and vegetation from Europe and beyond. The message is clear: that the whole of creation worships at the throne of the heavenly Lamb, and that the saving blood of the Lamb is poured out for the sins of all.

So in our earthly liturgy, in our Eucharistic rite, how appropriate it is that the last words which we hear before we approach the altar of God to receive the sacrament of our salvation under the forms of bread and wine are those of the Baptist: *Behold, the Lamb of God*. Behold Him who was slain for us and for the whole world, who bore our sins away in his body on the Tree; whom we, with the angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven, gather to adore.

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Mr Ian Boxall for this phrase. See Boxall: *The Revelation of St John*, Black's New testament Commentaries, London 2006. p 94.

*Preached at Pusey House on the Second Sunday of the Year, Year 'A.'*

*16<sup>th</sup> January 2011.*