



St Marylebone
Parish Church

11am Choral Eucharist 2nd Sunday of Epiphany

‘Listen to me’ began our first reading, from the prophecy of Isaiah.

How often have we all sat in church and then suddenly realised the first reading has slipped past us. The choir are already singing the anthem before the Gospel. A time for us to digest the first reading and prepare to hear the Gospel in the light of them, but we can’t because we were still day-dreaming during the first lesson. This is not a telling off: we’ve all done it!

How much better to make the effort to hear the words of the Hebrew Scriptures, or one of the letters in the New Testament, and reflect on them during the Gospel anthem, before standing for Alleluia. Then we hear the Gospel *illuminated* by the first reading.

Today we heard from the prophecy of Isaiah. ‘Listen to me’. Isaiah restates again the calling of Israel, the Hebrew people. Long before, the Lord had called, prepared the way, for Israel to be His chosen people – that through Israel – all the nations of the earth would be blessed and gathered together to the Lord. They would be ‘A light to the nations’ to carry God’s ‘salvation...to the end of the earth’.

And then five or six centuries later, St John’s Gospel plonks us on the banks of the Jordan. We are now in the company of the last of the prophets of the Old Testament: St John the Baptizer. He is the hinge between the Old Covenant or Testament and the New. In the Baptist we see that obedience to the law of Moses cannot be the means of God’s salvation being carried to the ends of the earth. Not even the great warrior Messiah king they were all waiting for could do that. None but God himself.

The thousands of years of human yearning and stumbling and living represented by Isaiah this morning is like light cast through the prism of John the Baptist and what image do we find?

‘Behold, the Lamb of God’.

And these words are heavy too. They carry with them centuries of Temple worship – of the millions of lambs sacrificed in the Temple – 100,000s each year at Passover. But not just that, these words carry with them years of difficult travel across the Arab Peninsula, of near extinction in tribal wars in the Old Testament histories, of exiles and imprisonments and before that of slavery in Egypt. Also in these words is that sparkling night of Exodus when the first Passover lambs were killed – blood smeared on doorposts – and families ate of the lamb in travelling cloaks and bags ready to escape pharaoh’s men in darkness.

St John the Evangelist, whose Gospel is given for today, is a master. As a sculptor works in clay or wood, St John works with words, theology and historical contexts laden with meaning. St John whisks them, shapes and weaves them, brings to new life, and produces something of unity and purpose and precision and depth.

Sticking with the whisk analogy – think Mary Berry’s genius with Meringues. But St John does it with Messiahs. Well, sort of.

Anyway...

These layers are St John’s genius. His Gospel has the complexity and momentum of a great symphony. But also, another brilliance, those scalpel moments of precision where in just a few words, He says it all.

‘Behold, the Lamb of God’. In those 5 words we have priest and sacrifice, Temple and Passover. The whole history of the Hebrew people, and the imperfect nature of the universe as we know it to be. The summation and explosion of all of it. Jesus is indeed God’s answer to it all. And St John the Baptist has just seen Him walk by over there. At once, simple and magnificent.

It is no accident that those words appear again in a simple and magnificent moment in our ‘here and now’. So simple as to be almost unbelievable, and yet too magnificent for our senses or faculties to fully grasp.

We will hear those words again in a few minutes when Fr Stephen holds up the Body and Blood of the same Jesus. The priest says them along with words from St John’s Revelation – ‘Blessed are those who are called to’ his supper, ‘the supper of the lamb’.

And we, as you know, respond with the words of the centurion when he asks Jesus to heal his favourite servant. Jesus offers to come to his home. He replies, ‘Lord I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof, but only say the word and my servant [soul] shall be healed’.

Magnificent and simple:

Thousands of years of Jewish history.

Billions of years of this chaotic, beautiful and oh so messed up universe.

20 centuries of the Church.

And you,
and me,
and Him.

Jesus in the Eucharist *is* our healing as we say, and our most intimate of lovers, our joy when we are happy, and our daily strength when we need Him most.

Every time we come to the Eucharist wherever in the world, our lives are being woven into this greatest of tapestries.

With John the Baptist, St John the Evangelist and all that came before them, and everything that has and will follow until Christ comes again.

We simply need to do what St John the Evangelist tells us those two disciples of John the Baptist did. ‘The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples and as he watched Jesus walked by, he exclaimed, ‘Look here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this and they followed Jesus.’

‘and they followed Jesus’ is the most exciting, important ‘true and lively’ words that could be said about a human being. In the light of all that the two St John’s have given us today. In the light of what Jesus will invite us to in a few moments time, what might these words mean for you this week of Epiphany?