

Sermon for combined service before AGM on Sunday 4 May 2025 – The Third Sunday of Easter

Texts: Acts 9.1-6; Revelation 5.11-end; John 21.1-19.

‘Worthy is the lamb that was slain’

‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain’. These words from the Book of Revelation bring to mind not only the well-known chorus from Handel’s ‘Messiah’ but a very famous painting. It is the early 15th century painting which is the centrepiece of a twelve-panel altarpiece at St Bavo’s Cathedral in Gent in Belgium – a work known as ‘The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb’ attributed to Hubert and Jan van Eyck. The lamb stands right at the centre of an altar looking out at the spectators. There is a wound in its throat from which blood pours into a golden chalice on the altar. Immediately above the altar, the Holy Spirit hovers as a dove and above this, is the figure of God the Father flanked by the Virgin Mary and St John, the beloved disciple. The altar is set in a meadow, and is immediately surrounded by angels some of whom hold symbols of Christ’s Passion, and they in turn are surrounded by panels representing humanity in all its fullness, - saints, sinners, and soldiers,

It is a stunning and deeply moving work which touches those who look upon it, above all through the depiction of the lamb. For the lamb looks out at us, with a gaze which is both solemn and tender, conveying the depth of Christ’s love and sacrifice for us. And as our eyes pass around the different figures shown on the surrounding panels, we see that their response is one of awe and adoration. It is a painting which incarnates those words which St John heard in his vision of heaven which is relates in the Book of Revelation:

*‘Worthy is the lamb that was slain
To receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
And honour and glory and blessing’ (Revelation 5.11)*

I first saw this work when I visited Gent with my mother and brothers as a teenager. It struck me powerfully then and remains etched on my mind. I strongly commend you to google it after the service and spend some time with it, in the context of prayer.

So why am I raising this today in the context of our AGM which follows this service? Because it reminds us why we are here and what our calling as a Christian community is all about.

For we can be inclined to see our Annual General Meeting as a bureaucratic necessity but no more. We are required under the Church Representation Rules to hold this meeting once a year, and there are tight regulations laid down which specify how it should be arranged and publicised, how it should be conducted and the required follow-up required afterwards. Seen positively within this framework, our Church’s AGM may be regarded as important for good governance, particularly of the fabric and assets which we have but no more than that.

But in fact, our AGM is a powerful catalyst to remind us that we are part of something far deeper and far more significant than this. For the reason we are here in the first place, what holds us together and gives us life and purpose as a Christian community is Christ. It is particularly appropriate that our AGM takes place in Eastertide when we celebrate Jesus, the one who offered himself for us on the Cross, who died for us and was raised by God, the Father, bringing us the hope of new life within the context of his resurrection life. The risen Christ, the mystic lamb, is releasing that life of the resurrection into our community even now in Eastertide and as we look forward to receiving the power of his Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Our calling like those gathered around the altar in the painting of the Mystic Lamb is also to respond with awe and deep adoration to God – with profound thanksgiving for His love which He has made known to us in Christ and to offer ourselves to be channels of that love in the world.

So it within this context that we approach our AGM, gathered as a community called into being by God's love shown to us in Christ, sustained by the Risen Christ and guided at each stage by the Holy Spirit.

The AGM is a time when we give thanks to God for all that we have received from Him and for all that He has made possible for us in our life together as a Church in the last year. It's why we, quite appropriately look back, think about and report on our worship, ministry and mission and the practical nuts and bolts including our fabric and financial resources which have helped to support this.

But this is also a time and a day when we need to take stock and consider where God is calling us to go next. For God is always calling us from the old to the new and sometimes this will be in new and unexpected directions. This in turn, challenges us to consider what we need to take from the old to resource the new and to discern what will encumber us and we need to lay down in this new phase of life as we journey with God.

Our first Bible reading and our Gospel reading today show us just how radical God's demands can be. We saw how Saul who hated and feared the newly growing Christian communities and persecuted them ruthlessly, underwent a complete change in his life and orientation when he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. It changed him from hating the very name of Christ to a passionate love of Christ. This, in turn, inspired him to become one of Christ's greatest apostles and evangelists and also to use his deep scholarship to lay the foundations of a great deal of the theological thinking which underlies the Christian faith as we have inherited it today.

Then in the Gospel we see how Peter is called by the risen Christ, whom he encounters on the beach after the night of fruitlessly trying to catch fish by their own efforts, to face his past honestly in Jesus' presence. He had to work through the agony of his last encounter with Jesus before his crucifixion when Peter had denied knowing him three times. Three times Jesus asks him, 'Simon, Son of John, do you love me?'. Each time, Peter is taken deeper into seeing that he does indeed love Christ at the very depth of his being and to realise that he will only serve him by

putting his trust in Christ, not on his efforts which had led to his total failure in the past.

And Christ responds to Peter by entrusting him to lead and build up his church, both those young in faith and young in years, as well as the older, more experienced members of the Christian community. It is an awesome responsibility. Yet we know this time it was going to work because Peter, like Paul after his conversion, was now rooting himself in Christ, putting his total trust and reliance for all that he was doing on him, rather than on his own efforts.

At our AGM we too are called to look ahead. We're called to do this remembering that this is *God's* Church. It's *God's* mission. We are *God's* people gathered here in this place. In other words, as with Saul and Peter at their moment of conversion, we realise that it is not 'our project' but *God's*. Nor are we expected to carry this out solely through our own efforts. Our life and ministry here at Holy Trinity are part of *God's* purpose and plan – our role is offer ourselves to the means and channel whereby *God's* mission may be carried out and glorified here in this context.

We do this together, rooted in our common life together, which is signified above all, as we gather to receive the Eucharist. I invite you today as you come forward to receive the eucharist or a Blessing, to think of Christ, the mystic lamb, the one who offers himself for us. As we encounter him in the Eucharist, so too He empowers us to be a channel of His love for others.

What we will also do in our AGM today is to start thinking how *God* may be calling us to do just that as an English- medium church in the heart of Geneva. This will include looking at what we discern our priorities for the year to be including increasing the diversity of our worship, equipping ourselves to testify with greater confidence about our Christian faith, reaching out more widely to provide practical help to those both locally and overseas, seeking to care for the world more responsibly through changing our lifestyles and finally looking at how we develop the fabric of our church and hall within the context of our Building Tomorrow project so that both we and those who will follow us, can develop the mission of this church.

Jesus asked Peter three times the question, "Simon, Son of John, do you love me?". Today, let's consider what our response to Jesus will be. Do we love Him? If so, what will that mean for each one of us here as we look at the year that lies ahead. If we love Him, how will we feed his sheep and tend his lambs?

Amen

The Revd Canon Dr Daphne Green