

ST ANDREW'S CHURCH GRAFHAM

'THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK'

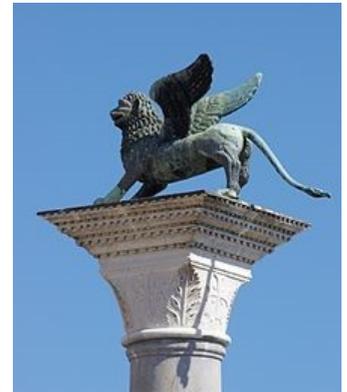
28th April 2021

Many of us will be familiar with the statue of the winged lion which from its pedestal dominates St Mark's Square in Venice. The city adopted the symbol of the lion when St Mark's relics were taken there in the ninth century. Those of you who know the city well will realise that there are lions lurking on practically every corner. But why was St Mark already associated with a lion?

As the Church kept the feast of St Mark earlier this week, I found myself thinking about the symbols associated with the four evangelists and in particular St Mark's lion. Just to remind you, Matthew's symbol is a man, Luke's a winged ox, and John's an eagle. The symbols were derived by St Irenaeus in the second century from the first and second chapters of Ezekiel in the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. However not everybody agreed with Irenaeus' attributions and they were rather flexible until settled by St Jerome a couple of hundred years later.

The attribution was not so much about the character of the particular evangelist as about how they had portrayed Jesus in the Gospel which bears their name. It reminds us that the Gospels are not identical. Each of the writers selected his own material and had his own perspective and understanding of Jesus. As a result we have a much fuller picture than we would have done from

a single account, which helps us to deepen our own knowledge of Jesus. In St Mark's account Jesus is seen as lion-like. The lion has always been a symbol of courage and of royalty. We think of someone being as brave as a lion. Richard I was called the Lionheart presumably because he was deemed to be a fearless leader. And we still call the lion the king of the beasts, an image reinforced by many stories and, most recently, films of the Jungle Book and the Lion King. St Mark himself would scarcely have merited such a description if there is any substance in the story that he was the young man who fled naked, leaving his linen cloth behind him, in a hurry to get away when Jesus was arrested! There were legends that lions were born dead and had to be brought to life by the breath, tongue and roar of the father; also that they slept with their eyes open - both stories carrying suggestions of the Resurrection.



Winged lion in St Mark's Square, Venice



St Mark with his lion from a sixteenth century Book of Hours

So often today we encounter the Gospels in bite-sized portions through either Sunday or daily readings. It's very easy to lose sight of the overall picture - the way the book is put together; what the writer is trying to tell us about Jesus; what the big questions are for that particular evangelist. St Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the four and now agreed by scholars to be the earliest, the closest to an eye-witness account, possibly based on the recollections of Peter. You

might like to read it from beginning to end in one or perhaps two sittings and see what impressions you come away with. Perhaps of Jesus, possibly of the disciples. Or maybe you'll notice particular themes recurring. What point is Mark trying to make? It is a particularly helpful thing to do this year so as to have the bigger picture in mind as most of the Gospel readings at the Sunday Eucharist come from St Mark's Gospel.

I could give you some clues but that would influence your reading! See what God is trying to show *you* as you read. Having read the whole Gospel, I hope that you will be intrigued and want to know more. In that case, I recommend two books: *The Strangest Gospel* by Nicholas King (published by Kevin Mayhew) and *Meeting God in Mark* by Rowan Williams (published by SPCK) either of which is an excellent starting point.

With love and prayers

Camilla

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