



La Côte Anglican Church

Fourth Sunday in Lent – Sermon from Alan Amos
10 March 2024 – Evening Prayer in Gingins

From 4th – 12th February, Clare and I were in Rome and then Ravenna, on a study course with the young people who are “interns” - students on placement – in our Diocese in Europe. Some of their tutors and mentors were with us as well, and it was particularly good to have Bishop David Hamid and his wife Colleen with us, just before Bishop David begins his retirement.

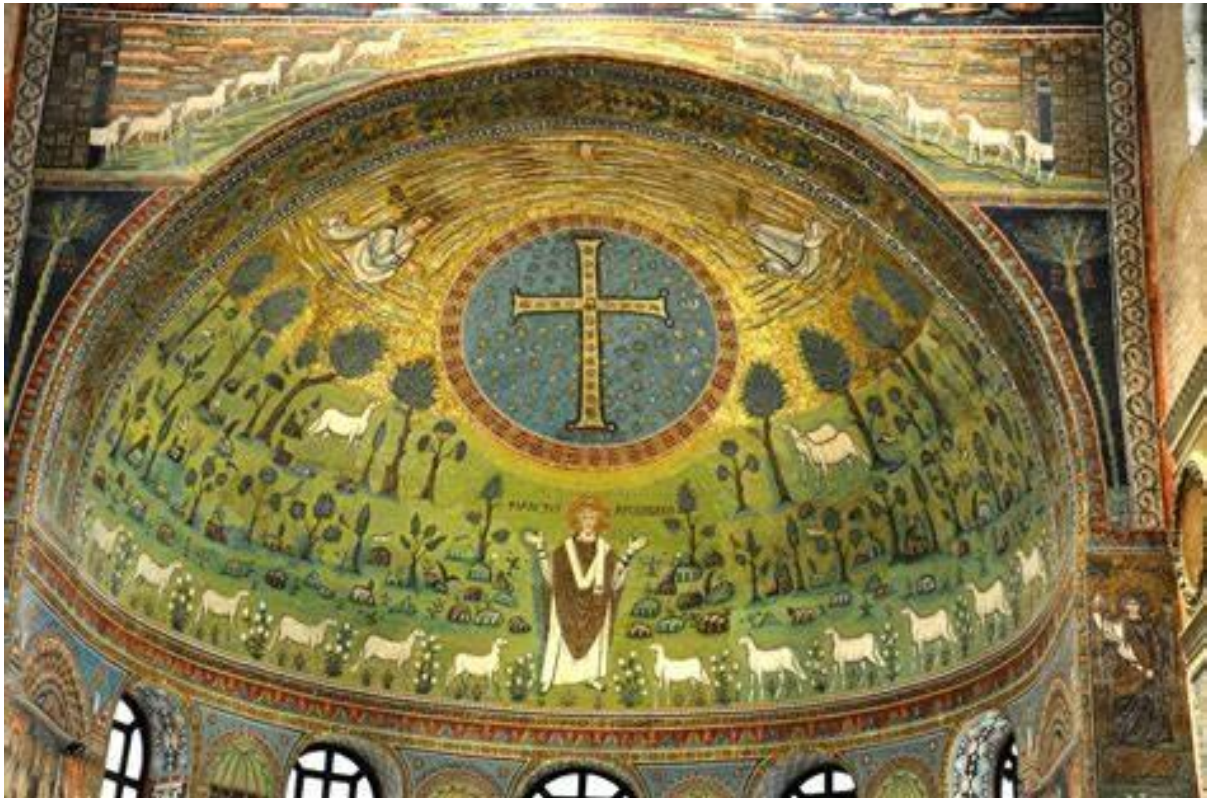
When we were in Rome, we explored beneath St. Peter’s basilica to see a tomb dating from the earliest Christian times, which may be the place where Peter himself was buried. And then we went to one of the catacombs and to one of the burial sites used by the first Christians in Rome and it was fascinating to see the artwork painted on the walls. We saw Christ as a beardless young man tending a flock of sheep; we saw the sign of the fish - the name for fish in Greek, IXTHUS, being used by the first Christians as a kind of code to represent Jesus, the letters taken to mean Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. And we saw a painting of a meal which could have been the last supper.

But we were reminded by one of the guides that in the earliest Christian period the Cross was not used in these places to represent the Christian message. That is probably because, as an instrument of shameful execution much used by the Roman emperors, the shape of the Cross needed time to take on its full and very different message as a sign of salvation.

And so the use of the Cross in Christian art was something that developed in later centuries, particularly when Christians felt safer within the life of the Roman empire.

I would like now to take you with me to the final stage of our journey, to Ravenna, a city which was for a time very central to the life of the Christian Roman Empire, that is from the fourth to the sixth centuries. There are a

number of wonderfully beautiful churches there, containing frescoes. A lot of Christian art from this period was destroyed by iconoclasts – those Christians who rejected the use of images in churches. But for various reasons Ravenna survived. I know that for Clare and myself, the most outstanding work of Christian art in Ravenna is a mosaic to be found in the Church of Saint Apollinaris, one of the early bishops of Ravenna.



I think it is a wonderful work of Christian imagination, symbolic in a very rich sense. Who could have imagined Peter, James and John as three sheep on the mountainside !

And above all, who could have imagined this splendid Cross, with right in the centre the face of Christ himself looking down upon us. Only those people who believed in the power of the Cross to save, and for that reason lifted it up to crown the apse of this beautiful church. So here we find Christ lifted up for us, but instead of the cross being the last word for a human life, it becomes the first word of the life of transformation, of transfiguration, it shares in the ministry of the one who suffers upon it, and calls us all to a vision of the glory

of God which if we can bear to look towards it, changes our lives and transforms them.

In that rather mysterious first reading this evening, of Moses lifting up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, for the Israelites, looking upwards to that image became the means of healing and deliverance.

Jesus says to us in the reading from St John

⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

And so it is truly by “surveying the wondrous Cross “ as Isaac Watts put it in his hymn, that we appropriate for ourselves the healing grace of Christ and the renewing power of his life within us.

And finally to the words of St. Paul which we find in two Corinthians chapter 3:

All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.