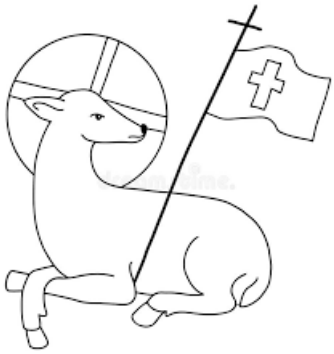

As the deer pants for the water brooks So my soul pants for You, O God. (Psalm 42:1)

The New Shofar

Be still! Know that I am God!

We live in a world that is impatient, too analytical to find time to stop and to savour the power of symbolism and acts of piety. We are overly sensitive to accusations of superstition and yet symbols, physical acts (bowing, genuflecting, signs of the cross, blessings, holy water and more) and images have been at the heart of our Christian traditions, even going back to the time of Israel. Back then, the faithful were so attuned to God in their lives, the entire creation sang to them of the presence of God, a divine presence filled with love, with power and compassion. God was never absent they proclaimed.

For same reasons, the Christian art that adorned the great Cathedrals and the icons of the Medieval church were created to carry the messages of Scripture to the general populous who were illiterate and could not read. The pictures and images proclaimed the Gospel and the revelation of Jesus Christ and what He had done in the world. The psalms in the Old Testament are good examples of the power of images and symbols. They are rich with them as in today's psalm…*like the deer that yearns for running water, so my soul pants for you, my God.* Pondering on that image alone could keep our minds in the presence of God for a long time.

Why a stag?

The deer we have here in Australia are feral animals and apart from Bambi we do not have much of a relationship with them. However, in the Ancient Near East and in European countries, they are more common and often used as canticles to the praise of God images giving witness to the power of God flowing into our lives.

One common image is that of the Stag trampling a serpent, swallowing a snake, and drinking from rivers of water. The Stag announces the power of water baptism and the promise of abundant life and victory over the serpent and his works. Just as Israel crossed through the Red Sea and the Jordan River into the Land of Promise, Jesus invites us to cross over into His kingdom and receive His promises of life and immortality.

It was believed in the Middle Ages (500-1500 AD) that the world itself was the Word of God and that every living thing had its own spiritual meaning. This of course is confirmed in Scripture in David's praise in **Psalm 19**: God's splendour is a poem that is told, sung for us in the stars. Space itself speaks His story through the marvels of the heavens. His truth is on tour in the starry vault of the sky, showing his skill in creation's craftsmanship. Each day gushes out its message to the next, night by night whispering its knowledge to all—without a sound, without a word, without a voice

being heard, yet all the world can hear its echo… *Everywhere its message goes out* (vs. 1-2).

The universe is a hymn to the glory of God

The Old Testament prophets also spoke of the saving power of God through symbolic allegory often using different animals which carried a prophetic code revealing truth. They used lions, bears, leopards, eagles, the leviathan, horses, serpents, crows, donkeys, deer, doves, foxes, jackals, lambs, etc. All these and many more held spiritual meanings and alerted their minds to the ways of God in the world around us.

Paul agreed with this truth that God's messages can be seen through creation. Writing to the church in Rome he explained, *For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see His invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God* (**Romans 1:20**). It is an invitation to tap into that divine all powerful glory.

The Bestiaries

Taking their cue from the Bible, Medieval Christian monks composed magnificently illustrated volumes called ***Bestiaries*** of animals and creatures. They spoke of the natural history of these animals and the illustrations of each beast was usually accompanied by a moral lesson that was an allegory symbolising complex aspects of the Christian faith. These are about reassuring the faithful of God's engagement in their world, that in every around them God was revealing his love and his mercy.

Early Bestiaries describe the Stag as a relentless enemy of snakes. In describing the habits of the Stags, it was recorded that Stags pursue snakes into their holes or rock crevices, flushing them out by flooding the hole with the breath or water from its mouth, and devouring them. The Stag then finds water and drinks large amounts of it to overcome the poison and is renewed. When the Stag is renewed it sheds its horns, which is viewed as resurrection life. So also, says the Bestiary, is the Christian saved, for *sin's trace is lost when in the baptism he is washed*.

Hind's feet in high places

Although not quite as nimble as goats, the Hind's ability to negotiate challenging terrain is reflected in the image of a Hind on a high place. A psalm of King David declares how his God has preserved his life and kept him safe during times of danger (particularly in escaping from his enemies). The image of the deer is particularly affecting here: *He made my feet like the feet of deer, and set me secure on the heights* **2 Samuel 22:34 and Psalm 18:33**. This image appears again in the words ascribed to the prophet Habakkuk: *God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the heights* (**3:19)**. Therein is our spiritual challenge in this post-Pentecost season, to be so attuned to the ever-present God in our lives, that we pause to give thanks, to humble ourselves before the Almighty and to praise God as his children grateful that he is a God who is never absent, not even from the minutia of our lives.