

## Wednesday Reflection: Rabbits



Over the past few weeks I have been reflecting on visitors to the manse garden, including hedgehogs, butterflies, bats and fairies. Towards evening, we are blessed with an occasional visit from rabbits. Quietly, they sneak under the fence and stand motionless, poised in the middle of the lawn. The moment they spot me watching them they dart out of sight with immense speed.

What might we say of rabbits in the Christian tradition? Dating from the Mediaeval period, many churches have rabbits carved into the stonework. Rabbits and hares were often depicted interchangeably. Three hares sharing ears between them artistically represent the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is an excellent example of this in Paderborn Cathedral in Germany.



In his painting *Agony in the Garden*, the Italian artist, Andrea Mantegna, portrays the suffering of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The disciples lie asleep while Christ prays on an elevated rock. The imposing walls of the city of Jerusalem can be seen in the background. Under the night sky, three rabbits conspicuously sit on the path which meanders through the garden. A symbol of the Trinity,

one of the rabbits makes its way to be with Jesus; this is the Second Person of the Trinity.

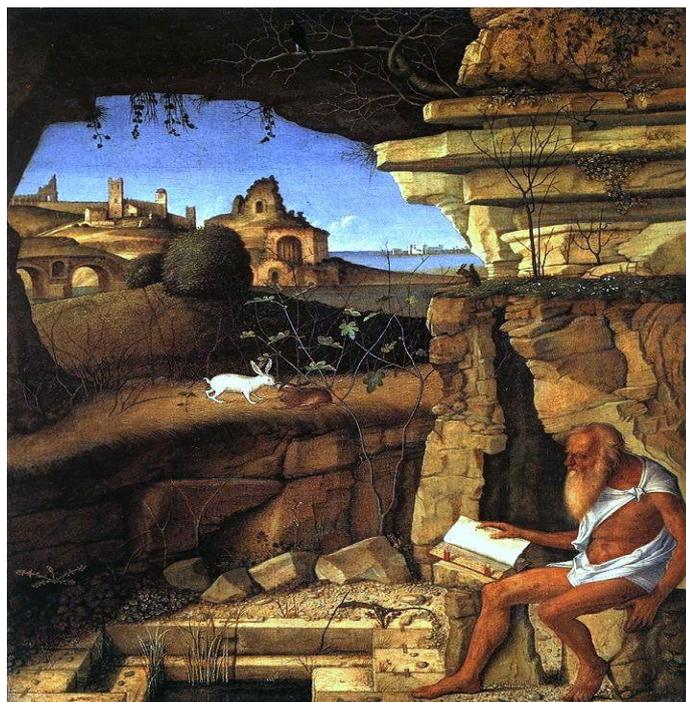
Elsewhere in Christianity, rabbits are a symbol of sin. In Wimborne Minster in Dorset, there are two ornate stone corbels. In the first, a rabbit is in the mouth of a hound and, in the second, a rabbit is being hunted by a hawk. In both cases, these images represent Christ hunting sin.

In pre-Christian Europe, the hare was a symbol of fertility. Associated with Spring, the Easter Bunny is perhaps an extension of that thinking. In the Lutheran tradition, the Easter Rabbit or Hare played the role of a judge deciding whether children had been good or otherwise before the start of the season of Easter.



In his painting, *The Madonna of the Rabbit*, the Italian artist, Titian, has Mary seated with the Christ-Child on her right and in her left hand she gently holds a white rabbit. The white rabbit is here a symbol of her purity, virginity and fertility.

Bellini's painting, *St Jerome reading in the Countryside*, depicts the saint studying in a cave seated to the right of centre, while two rabbits, one white and one brown, occupy the central focus. A hermit, Jerome is best known for his translation of the Bible into Latin. Is it possible that the rabbits represent life and life beyond death, the brown and the white? In some Christian thought, rabbits symbolised resurrection.



Throughout Scotland, rabbits are a very common sight: in our gardens, in fields, at the roadside and, sadly, sometimes lying dead on the road. How many of us I wonder have or have had a rabbit as a pet? As a child, our son had a black rabbit called Patrick, which freely moved around in the manse garden for several years. Unfortunately, in old age he was killed by a fox.

Known for their swift and nimble movement, rabbits are cute but can also bite. Next time you see a rabbit remember that it is an animal with strong Christian symbolism. Let it be a sign of resurrection, new life, and new birth. Let the humble rabbit remind you of the Presence of the Trinity surrounding you.