

Epiphany 2A 18/01/26

St John the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God and thus signifies Jesus' mission as the One who redeems us from our sins. The blood of the Passover Lamb in Exodus 12 delivered the Israelites in Egypt from slavery and death. The Lord Jesus freely offered up his life for us on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 Corinthians 5:7). The blood which he poured out for us on the cross cleanses, heals, and frees us from our slavery to sin, and from the "wages of sin which is death" (Romans 6:23) and the "destruction of both body and soul in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

Last Sunday we commemorated the Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We heard from St. Matthew's Gospel how St John the Baptist saw God's Spirit alight upon Jesus, and a voice from heaven identify him as "my Son, the Beloved." Today our Gospel comes from St. John and the scenario of Christ's baptism is advanced. We are told that the Baptist bears witness to Christ by proclaiming the following words to his disciples: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) Like John the Baptist, today we may wish to use today's Gospel as a personal and corporate call to become a witness to the Lamb of God.

It is significant that John was the son of Zachariah, a priest of Israel who participated in the daily sacrifice of a lamb in the temple for the sins of the people (Exodus 29). John recognised that Jesus was the perfect unblemished lamb offered by the Father in heaven as the one and only sacrifice that could cancel the debt of sin, and free us from death.

Christ as Lamb of God is a familiar title to us. In the Eucharist, at "the breaking of the bread" (the fraction) or at the "fraction anthem," we proclaim what the Baptist said in word or song. Our traditional fraction anthem is the *Agnus Dei – O Lamb of God, that takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us/grant us peace*. These words are more than something said or sung. In them we give expression to our deepest understanding of the identity and purpose of Jesus Christ as our Lamb and Lord. By his life of love and sacrifice, we believe and affirm that he is the one who came and continues to come into a broken world to take our sins upon himself.

Winston Churchill once called his political opponent "a sheep in sheep's clothing."

At least for much of the 19th Century popular art, hymns and poetry tended to portray Jesus sheepishly as "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." Part of the problem would seem to be that we confuse love with sentimentality. Social media, for all its wonders, seems to have fuelled concepts of anger and love, easily protected by a firewall of separation from physical contact. Pictures of cute little kittens fight for screen space with graphic videos of atrocities. "False news" stimulates belief, particularly among those who haven't received basic training on how truth should be distinguished from falsehood.

So when Jesus walked by and John announced to his followers, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!", what were they to make of such an improbable claim? If they had the slightest familiarity of their faith and religious tradition, two words stood out. They were "lamb" and "sins."

The foundation of first century Judaism was based on two traditions. The older, the one that placed the Temple centre stage, invoked memories of their father Abraham, as he attempted to offer his wife Sarah's only son Isaac as a human sacrifice. In Genesis God's messenger instructed Abraham

to substitute an available animal, a goat, for his son. Also The blood of the Passover Lamb in Exodus has the same imagery in delivering the Israelites in Egypt from slavery and death. These two stories have many nuances, but most importantly is the step they make from barbarism to a more benign concept of substitution. God was going to accept an animal, albeit one in mint condition, as a blood offering by which the person, family, tribe or nation were “atoned”, made one with their Creator. Around this system grew the Tabernacle and then the Temple cult, supervised by an hereditary priesthood descended from Moses’ brother-in-law Aaron to Zechariah, John’s father.

The second vital part of Jewish religion in the days of Jesus was the schule or synagogue system. The Old Testament tells the story of Israel, torn apart, situated between aggressive world powers, conquered again and again. The conquering powers sought to obliterate the Jewish people by destroying their visible connection with God. The exile from Jerusalem and the destruction of the First Temple. Those Jewish people taken hostage “by the waters of Babylon” not only wept; they gathered together to hear their Scriptures read by authorised teachers. In first century Palestine Temple worship, with its substitutionary sacrifices, situated in Jerusalem sat together with synagogue practice, hearing and receiving the Scriptures and applying them to daily life.

Note how today’s Gospel brings together these two practices, not in a theory, but in a Person. Jesus is the sacrificial lamb, “who died that we might be forgiven, who died to make us good.” Jesus is also the Rabbi, the authorised teacher, in whom God’s law is renewed and applied to the new citizens in his chosen nation.

If you are up to date with the never-ending church squabbles about how Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross is a substitute for our sins, our family sins, the Church’s sins and that “of the whole” world, we need to remember the important point that God knows how this is fully true, not us. Therefore our minds are best focused on the Eucharist, rather than on theories of how Atonement works; on a Person rather than a theory.

In the Holy Meal the Eucharist, we re-member. We bring to life in the here and now, the sacrifice, once offered for the sins of the whole world. We eat and drink, ingest, the life of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Before we reach that point in the service, we hear Jesus the Rabbi, the authorised teacher, expounding to us God’s law, the words Jews heard at the time of Jesus and the words Christians have heard since the time of Jesus. And we corporately confess our misdeeds, missteps and flirtations with evil.

We do so as God’s community of priests, as we stand between God and the human race, the nations, the Church, our families and ourselves.

Sitting in your pew this morning, look up, and with the mind of faith see the Lamb of God, the one you call Rabbi, and in your hearts pray, “Have mercy on us. Grant us peace.”

Fr Robert Newton