



Second Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon by Revd Sharmain James



15 January 2023

READINGS

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-34

Jesus the Lamb of God

Sometimes we like to use animals to describe people - for example: If you say someone is like a “Bull in a China shop” - you are describing a person that is very careless in the way they move or behave. We may say someone is as stubborn as a mule. We also like to compare the eating habits of people to that of animals. If I say she eats like a bird - it means she doesn't eat much. If you say someone eats like a “horse” – it means that person has a large appetite. However, if you say someone eats like a “pig” – it means they are messy eaters. What kind of animal describes you?

In our Gospel reading today – John the Baptist wants people to know who Jesus is – so he uses an animal to explain Jesus to them. In today's passage we read: - As John sees Jesus coming towards him, he tells all who can hear that Jesus is the Lamb of God. As a child my favourite toy was a stuffed lamb – and because I loved it so much - I always associated lambs as nice, warm, and cuddly animals. But is that what John the Baptist meant? For some people lambs are not high on their list of beloved and admired animals. They are not noted for their strength or looks. They are not impressive like elephants, lions, or eagles. Even though lambs are not a impressive animals – lambs meant something else to John's congregation. For a Jew it had a very important purpose in Jewish life.

Throughout the Old Testament, a lamb was sacrificed at an altar as an act of worship to God and the means of atoning for sin. The sacrificial lamb was a substitute. Instead of a man or woman dying for his or her sins, God provided the lamb to take the place of that person, and the blood of the lamb paid the penalty for their sin. The phrase: - “Lamb of God” would also conjure up images of the Passover Lamb sacrificed in Israel's escape from Egypt. God delivered them from slavery in Egypt with ten miraculous plagues against Pharaoh. The last and final plague was the death of the first-born son.

God gave Moses instructions to give to the Hebrew people to save them from this plague. Each family was to take a spotless lamb, kill the lamb, take the blood and put it on the doorposts of their home. Next the entire family was to stay inside, under the covering of the blood and when the angel of death - “passed over” he would see the blood and that home would have life instead of death. That fateful night in Egypt, those under the blood of the lamb were saved, and those not under the blood of the lamb died. To this day, the Jewish people observe Passover and celebrate the dramatic way in which God delivered them from the yoke of slavery.

In today's Gospel reading we see how Jesus absolutely identified with this means of sacrifice. When John proclaimed Jesus as the Lamb, he also identified the reason for the Lamb's coming: To take away the sin

of the world. There was never a moment when Jesus did know what he was born for. Taking on our humanity, Jesus was able to say, "Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will". Jesus did not come to earth to remain a baby in a manger. He did not even live in Bethlehem for most of his life. The angels, the shepherds and the wise men – they all came and went.

Jesus grew into a boy and then into a man. He came to complete his Father's business – and that business was the work of the Lamb. He was a lamb coming to take away the sins not just of the Jewish people, but every people. Jesus embraces the sacrificial purpose of the Lamb in Jewish mentality to become precisely the acceptable sacrifice offered to the Lord to take away the sins of the whole world. He became the Suffering Servant Isaiah prophesied in today's first reading, and "like a lamb" he would submit to be "led to the slaughter"

Beholding Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Jews were being invited to see something far greater at work than just a recently arrived carpenter from Nazareth. They were being challenged to see in Jesus something far greater than met the eye. And through the Baptist's words and work, they were being called by God to relate to Jesus under this title, to see him as the great scapegoat who had come to save them from the sins that would alienate them from God forever.

So when John calls Jesus the Lamb of God – he is pointing to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. A sacrifice which we believe atones for our sins and reconciles us to God. And what makes Jesus sacrifice effective is not that it is bloody – but – that it is motivated by love. Just as the Israelites were liberated from Egypt through the blood of the Passover lamb, so too is the world liberated from sin, death, and darkness by the sacrificial life and love of Jesus Christ. We have a glimpse of this truth in the most famous verse in scripture: For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son – that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Jesus wasn't just given to us to be a friend and teacher. He was not just given to preach to thousands – challenge religion, heal the sick and raise the dead. Jesus came to die – not just any death – but the one death that could take away our sin. Your sin, my sin and the sin of everyone who chooses to believe in Him and His work. Jesus is the Lamb in whom, as St. Paul reminds the Corinthians today, that we have been sanctified, and call everywhere upon him by that name so that we might be holy.

To learn to relate to Jesus as Lamb is crucial for this life and eternal life. Many of us think we do, because we're familiar with the title and even recite it multiple times in our liturgy. But we see in today's Gospel that John the Baptist said something startling. Even though he was his cousin, John stated, "I did not know him." He surely knew of him, but he needed God the Father's voice and the Holy Spirit's coming down on Jesus as a dove to be able to recognize him and come to know him better.

Similarly, while we certainly know about Jesus as Lamb of God, we are all called humbly to get to know him personally much better through relating to him as Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

Amen