

Epiphany II 2020 (19th January) Lamb of God

Jesus is the sacrifice that takes away the sin of the world.

‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.’

Not, you’ll note, Behold the great teacher who will show you all how to live. Not, behold the great miracle worker who will heal your sick, feed your hungry, walk on the water. Not, behold the great leader who will bring justice and peace and God’s kingdom. All those things are important, but first: Behold the Lamb of God. That’s what leaps from John the Baptist’s lips when he first sees Jesus; that’s what John the Evangelist wants to put front and centre at the beginning of his Gospel. At the end of his Gospel too, when he has the hour of Jesus’ death coincide with just the moment when, elsewhere in Jerusalem, the Passover lambs are being slaughtered. The true Lamb, John is saying, is being slaughtered on the Cross. The true sacrifice is happening there. And that, more than anything else, is what the Gospel – John’s Gospel, and *the* Gospel, our Good News, is about.

Trying to define sacrifice too tightly is a bit like trying to define music, or art, or wisdom. It’s a bigger, elusive, more mysterious reality than any of the explanations people have offered of it. And they have offered *lots*, as to why the death, the death by bloodshed of an animal and then of Jesus should ever have been considered so crucial, so necessary, as how it might be sacrifice, for our sake, for our salvation. Like so many things in our religion, the only way to understand this one is on your knees, in prayer, and it won’t be so much a matter of understanding as of absorbing, adoring, imbibing. Why and how Jesus is the Lamb, the Sacrifice, is one of those mysteries you can only dive deeper and deeper into.

That said, we do at least have some starting places. The Old Testament, and a whole host of other religions too, had the idea that sacrifice represented a gift from humans to God. Of course, God didn't actually *need* the gift – he wouldn't go hungry if nobody gave sheep to him. He didn't *eat* things. But there was a shared insight across several cultures that these gifts were nevertheless necessary to make things right with God, or the gods. Sometimes that was thought about really crudely: let's try and bribe the gods with a nice sacrifice. Other times, it was tremendously profound. When we sacrifice, we give of our best to God. The sacrifice represents our gratitude, or our repentance, our commitment, poured out freely, utterly, without reserve towards God. And in response to that pouring, God will pour out towards us in peace, favour, love: our relationship with Him will be made right.

The basic claim of the New Testament is that Jesus of Nazareth is the one true sacrifice. In him alone all which humanity hoped for from its sacrifices actually happens. He is the perfect gift from humanity to God, the perfect offering of gratitude, of love – even, and this is yet more mystery – of repentance. Jesus did not sin. He was the Righteous One, the one human life ever lived straight and true and without exception as it was meant to be, as God wanted it. Indeed, he was the Holiness and Goodness of God, as it were translated into a human life. He was the Lamb *of God*: provided by God, coming from God, God of God Himself made one of us. And so there is nothing of sin in him. But he chose, the New Testament says, first as his baptism and then at the Cross to cover himself with it: with all the darkness, all the sludge, and all the sheer wickedness of the world. He said, 'I will bear all the weight. All the pain. All the failure. I will make it all my own, and bring it before my Father in sorrow, in repentance, in love. I will pour out my life for the sin of the world.'

And because He did, the Gospel says, He took it away. Because He poured Himself out to his Father for the world, in response the Father poured too Poured love, and forgiveness, and healing, and transformation onto the world. The sludge, and the darkness, and the wickedness: they are no longer the defining facts of the world, no longer the most important thing. The world had slaved under them, had looked broken beyond repair, had *been broken* beyond repair – but only because no-one could have imagined *this* work, this cure, this sacrifice. What humanity could not do for itself, God the Son stepped in and did for us: as one of us he offered sacrifice more radical, more comprehensive, more effective than all the evil which we do. That's why we call it *Good Friday*. As St. Paul put it: as in Adam all die – even so, and much more so, in Christ shall all be made alive.

That, friends, is the Gospel. No doubt there's more that could be said, and it could be said better, but in its essence, that's it. Jesus is the Lamb of God. His death is the one, true, final sacrifice – the great mystery which takes all our evil and places it within the goodness and mercy and sorrow of God. Which holds it there, and ends it, and gives us back instead the promise of life and joy and peace, of a world freed from all that is wrong and which will be new in the glory of God.

And what do you need to *do* about all of this? What practical suggestion do I have for how to apply it, what activities can you undertake? Well, the first and best answer is: *nothing at all*. The Deed has been done. It is accomplished, as John's Jesus cries at the last (Jn.19:30). You will hear plenty of suggestions from this pulpit, not least from me, about what should happen next, on our part. Some of them will even be quite good. But the first is the best, and a true Epiphany-tide answer: *do nothing*. Stop all your busy-ness. Sit down. Kneel down. Ponder. Contemplate. Absorb. Let it all wash over you. Sink deeper and deeper into it. Think and pray and open yourself to what all these words mean, to this mysterious death. Behold the Lamb of God. Let that phrase inside you, and let it take root, in mind, in heart, in imagination. The death which takes away the sin of the world. The death which sets all things free and steers them towards glory. The death which takes *your* failure, and makes it right.

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