



The Lamb of God (who takes away the sin of the world)

A great crowd has gathered on the banks of the river Jordan this day like all the days before. John the Baptist is standing on the shore, like one of the prophets of old. Day after day the people come, streaming from the towns and villages. They come seeking forgiveness and a new beginning, hungry and thirsty for new life. They come for news of God's Messiah. They know that John is not the one, but John the Baptist has come to prepare the way.

Then one day John is in the midst of the river, baptising. The crowds part, and John sees someone coming towards him on the shore: Jesus. As I imagine the scene, there is a deep silence as Jesus reaches the shore and each looks at the other with understanding and with love. Then, before Jesus comes into the water to be baptised, John declares to the crowd:

“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

It's an astonishing statement. John the Baptist's cry stands as a kind of headline above the whole of the fourth gospel. Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The chapters which follow will show the reader again and again the truth contained in this single declaration.

Welcome back to Come and See. Our theme is meeting Jesus in the Eucharist. We began with meeting Jesus here as a servant who welcomes us, as the gracious, gentle host at the meal. All of us are invited. We are all loved and valued deeply. Our theme this week is set by John's words, words which form a key part of every celebration of Holy Communion: Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

John's words capture something essential about who Jesus is and something vital about what Jesus has done. The image of the Lamb is a surprising image of weakness and vulnerability. John will testify after the baptism that Jesus is the Son of God. But this Son of God does not come among us in power and strength and glory as the world understands these

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things. This is the mystery. The Son of God comes as a lamb: gentle, vulnerable, humble. There is a fragility to Almighty God taking flesh and coming to live among us.

This image of the Lamb right at the beginning of the gospel draws our attention above all to the cross, to the way that Jesus will die and to the meaning of Jesus death. John is drawing here on several strands of the Old Testament to offer us his picture of Jesus, his understanding of who Christ is.

First Jesus is the Passover Lamb. The story of the Passover is told in the Book of Exodus in Chapter 12. The Passover is a meal which remembers, like the Eucharist. The Passover recalls the exodus itself: the night that God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Each family was to take and prepare a lamb from their flock. They were to put some of the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and the lintels of their homes. When God brought the final plague on the Egyptians to bring Israel out of captivity, the Angel of the Lord would pass over the homes marked with the blood of the lamb. These homes would be places of life and not of death.

This great symbolic meal at the heart of Israel's identity now becomes also a sign which points to a deeper reality. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The great purpose of his life is in his death. Jesus offers up his life on the cross so that forgiveness and freedom can be offered by God not to one nation but to all the world.

Second, Jesus is the sacrificial lamb which God has provided. The Book of Genesis tells the story of Abraham and his son Isaac told in Genesis 22. God seems to ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac his son on Mount Moriah, later, by tradition, near the site of the temple in Jerusalem. As Abraham and Isaac make the journey up the mountain to the place of sacrifice, with Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice, Isaac asks this question: "The fire and the wood are here but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?". Abraham responds: "God himself will provide a lamb for a burnt offering, my son".

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According to John the Baptist, Jesus, the Son of God, is the Lamb God has provided for a sacrifice to take away the sins of the whole world and to enable new life and new beginnings.

Third John the Baptist recalls the Servant Songs of the Book of Isaiah and especially Isaiah 53:

“He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed...”

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (Isaiah 53.5,7)

In the long story of the Universe, God made the whole of creation and declared that creation was good. Sin, wrong doing, falling short, missing the mark, entered the world through human disobedience, disobedience in which we all share.

God sends his son to give his life once and for all for the sins of the world so that our sin can be taken away and forgiven and so that the world can be restored and be remade. All this meaning is wrapped up in John the Baptist’s words.

The gospels will show us in different ways the deep meaning of Christ’s death on the cross. In John’s gospel we will read of Jesus description of himself as the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep (10.11). We will read of the grain of wheat which must fall into the ground and die in order that it might bear much fruit (12.23). We will read of Jesus being lifted up on the cross like the bronze image of the snake raised up in the wilderness to bring healing to his people (3.14). Most powerfully of all we will read Jesus final words from the cross: It is finished (19.30): a cry of victory not defeat in the face of death.

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The meal that Jesus gives us in Holy Communion is memory of his life but most of all of the meaning of his death. Remember Paul's words: "For as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11.26)".

Jesus himself, at the Last Supper, is clear about the meaning of his death and the signs he gives us in the bread and in the wine:

"Then he took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. And he did this in the same way with the cup after supper saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22.19-21).

All of these ideas are deeply woven into the service of Holy Communion. One of the most beautiful prayers in the English language, adapted from the old Prayer Book, is used now as the congregation prepare to receive Holy Communion. It's known as the Prayer of Humble Access. The prayer begins with the theme of radical welcome: we know we are invited. But we also know we are not worthy and we come with empty hands needing God's grace and God's forgiveness:

We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord,
Trusting in our own righteousness but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table
But you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy.

We come like the tax collector in the parable, in humility before God and before others. Then the second part of the prayer seeks again the grace of forgiveness as we share through faith in the body and blood of the Lord:

Grant us therefore, gracious Lord,
So to eat the flesh of your dear Son, Jesus Christ and to drink his blood
That our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body

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And our souls washed through his most precious blood
And that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us.

We have been healed and forgiven, once and for all. But every time we come to this meal we stand on holy ground, poor in Spirit, conscious of our sin and weakness and need of grace offering empty hands to receive, by faith, the gift of Christ's body and his blood. This is why every time we come to Holy Communion we confess our sins and hear the priest pronounce forgiveness and absolution, because of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

John the Baptist's solemn declaration is quoted directly in not one but two solemn moments in the service. In the Gloria, the song of praise near the beginning of the service, we sing these words:

Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God
You take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.

And just before we come forward to receive, we sing again, three times:

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us
Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, grant us peace.

There is nothing we can do to merit, earn or deserve God's forgiveness in Christ. Everything is grace. There is nothing we can do either to reach a complete understanding of exactly how the death of Jesus on the cross accomplishes the forgiveness of sins in all of creation. We can explore and think and imagine and draw on the insights of other Christians before us.

But in the end we simply trust in the truth of John the Baptist's testimony, in the assurances of Jesus himself and of the scriptures, in the experience of countless millions of faithful Christians who have gone this way before us: this forgiveness, this making new, this cleansing, this salvation is real and is

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made present to us Sunday by Sunday in these powerful gifts of bread which is broken and wine poured out.

The next time you share in the Eucharist, know that you come to meet the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. One of the greatest privileges of my life, like that of any priest, is to celebrate the Eucharist with God's people. Every time I pray the Eucharistic prayer I wonder afresh at the wideness of God's mercy and the depth of what was accomplished in Christ's death on the cross.

These are for me the most powerful words in any of our great prayers of thanksgiving and consecration and are taken again from the old Prayer Book:

All glory to you our heavenly Father, who in your tender mercy gave your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption;

Who made there by his one oblation of himself once offered a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world; he instituted and in his holy gospel commanded us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death until he comes again.....

The words and the sentence structure may be unfamiliar here. The word oblation means Jesus offering of himself. The adjectives and nouns are set in an unfamiliar structure like a mirror image. The prayer is describing Jesus full satisfaction, perfect sacrifice and sufficient oblation in his death on the cross.

But the line which always catches in my heart and sometimes in my throat is "for the sins of the whole world".

I know and understand, painfully, how much sin there can be in one human heart and life. I have some understanding of how much sin there can be in one part of God's church and God's world. The sin of the whole world is

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beyond measure and comprehension: yet Christ's sacrifice is enough and more than enough to offer forgiveness.

And so I come, in every Eucharist, just as I am to the foot of the cross in the words of Charlotte Elliot's great hymn:

Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidd'st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, and waiting not
to rid my soul of one dark blot,
to thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, thou wilt receive,
wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

We meet discover Jesus in the Eucharist first as the servant and host who welcomes us; second as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Next time we will explore Jesus as the Bread of Life who feeds us on the journey. Come and see!