

Good Friday 2013

Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world

Introduction

John 1 V 29 : *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*

Every week during the Communion service, we sing or say the AGNUS DEI, the reflection of the words of John the Baptist as reported in John's gospel, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world". The lamb as a symbol for Jesus recurs throughout the new testament, and is itself part of the symbol for John the Baptist, the "lamb and flag" to be found all through this church.

So what do we mean when we say these words, and end them with "bring us your peace"?

In this hour, we are going to reflect on the layers of meaning in that seemingly simple phrase, and try to see whether it helps us in our understanding of the Good Friday sacrifice.

Let's start with a prayer.

Prayer - Father, on this solemn day we remember your Son and his sacrifice for us all. We wonder, and ponder, and sometimes come close to understanding why he had to die so that we might live. In this next hour, make us aware of your Son's presence with us, as he promised if two or three are gathered in his name, and send us your Holy Spirit of truth and inspiration. **Amen**

Hymn - Come and see.....(MP85) **Verses 1 and 2 only**

1 John's Lamb of God

Reading from John 1 v29-34

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John bore witness, "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

Is there a difference between the scripture and our practice of Holy Communion? What are the exact words that John puts into the Baptist's mouth? "...that takes away the sin of the

world". And what do we sing or say? ".....that takes away the sins of the world". Does it make a difference?

I think it does. "Sin" is the state of ungodliness that all humankind inherits from Adam and Eve, who disobeyed God and were cut off from his presence, expelled from the garden and deprived of the tree of life. "Sins" are the acts of commission and omission, the things we do and the untaken opportunities to do good, that result from our condition of sin. Our misdeeds.

For which of these did the Lamb of God die? During his ministry, Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, and that prayer is one that the Christian world has adopted universally. In the Lord's Prayer we ask that God "forgive us our trespasses", qualified by "just as we forgive those who trespass against us". That's a direct, daily appeal to God for forgiveness. If God is able to forgive us our misdeeds by a simple, heartfelt appeal directly to himself, did it also need Jesus' death on the cross? Or was the sacrifice not for the things we do or don't do, but for our very condition of sinfulness?

Finding forgiveness for our constant wrong thoughts and deeds is one of the great consolations of a Christian life. We can ask forgiveness and know that our weaknesses are understood, and that if we resolve to mend our ways, honestly and sincerely, we will receive just that, forgiveness - until the next time.

But how do we lose that innate inclination to do the wrong things, or as the old Book of Common Prayer puts it, I think quoting Paul, "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things that we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us".

"There is no health in us". We lose that condition of sin when we accept the sacrifice, that one perfect and sufficient oblation, of Jesus on the cross. The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. We continue to find forgiveness for our trespasses, our sins, our acts of commission and omission, through contrition and prayer. But our sin is washed away by Jesus' saving self-sacrifice on the cross.

Let's have a short prayer.

Prayer - Father, forgive us our sins, daily, as we forgive others. And, through our acceptance of your Son's willing sacrifice, free us from the burden of our sinful condition. His death on the cross was our sacrifice to you, our sacrifice of a perfect lamb of God. We thank you for all the benefits of that sacrifice, and commit ourselves to a daily remembrance of his saving act, and to daily ask your forgiveness of all our wrongdoings.
Amen

Hymn : God forgave my sin, in Jesus' name, I've been born again, in Jesus' name.....
(MP181)

2 Community Sacrifice and atonement for sin

Exodus 29:38-42 *“This is what you are to offer on the altar regularly each day: two lambs a year old. Offer one in the morning and the other at twilight. With the first lamb offer a tenth of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with a quarter of a hin^l of oil from pressed olives, and a quarter of a hin of wine as a drink offering. Sacrifice the other lamb at twilight with the same grain offering and its drink offering as in the morning—a pleasing aroma, a food offering presented to the LORD.*

⁴² *“For the generations to come this burnt offering is to be made regularly at the entrance to the tent of meeting, before the LORD. There I will meet you and speak to you;*

Isaiah 53:7 *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.*

The lamb as the Temple sacrifice for the atonement of the sins of the people

The practice of sacrifice has been around in human society from very early times. Archaeology has provided examples of sacrificial remains in graves, in sacred lakes and rivers, under altars and under the foundations of houses in a wealth of civilisations from every continent on earth.

People offered the things they valued most, in the form animals they had raised, crops they had grown, items they had made of gold, silver, bronze, clay and wood. Many societies made the supreme sacrifice of human life, giving their own children to satisfy the gods.

By the time the book of Exodus was written, about the days of Moses, the Jews no longer practiced human sacrifice, but the sacrifice of animals continued until the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. Every day, in the Temple at Jerusalem, one lamb was killed at sunrise and another at sunset.

The standard set for the sacrifice was high. The lamb must be a young adult, It must be perfect, free of any birth defect, any disease, any injury, and chosen by the High Priest from among the flock

It must be sacrificed in the Temple at Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where Abraham had taken Isaac for sacrifice. It must be ritually killed by the High Priest, having it's throat cleanly cut, so that it did not cry out. The blood of the lamb must be poured out over the Altar. (Jewish altars were fitted with drain holes which led to a network of canals under the Temple Mount). And so it went on, 2 sacrifices every day, for hundreds of years, from the time of the Exodus, during the 40 years in the wilderness, up to the destruction of the Temple by the Roman Empire.

The sacrifice was essential to wash away the sin of the Jewish people.

Is this the model for The Lamb of God? Was He the perfect and acceptable sacrifice? He was perfect, without sin. He was chosen by the Greatest High priest, God, His Father. His blood was poured over the earth for the forgiveness of Sin for all humanity.

But the difference between the daily sacrifice of a lamb, and the one off sacrifice of Jesus was that Jesus gave his life freely and knowingly. The sacrifice of Jesus was final, complete and unrepeatable. Christians have never needed to sacrifice animals, because our sacrifice is complete.

Prayer: The Shepherd's eye by Egbert, Archbishop of York in 743

Look down O Lord from heaven,
on thy flocks and on thy lambs:
Bless their bodies and their souls
and grant that they who have received
thy sign, O Christ, on their foreheads
may be thine own in the day of judgement:
through Jesus Christ our Lord, **Amen.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us...

3 The Scapegoat

Leviticus 16 v 7-8 *And he shall take the two goats, and present them before the LORD at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the LORD, and the other lot for the scapegoat.*

"Scapegoat". It's one of those phrases that we use without necessarily realising where it comes from and without necessarily understanding what it means. There's a painting of the Scapegoat by William Holman Hunt, and whenever I hear the phrase, that's what springs into my mind, the goat on the edge of the wilderness, already looking as though its days are numbered. His painting had two quotations engraved on the frame. One from Isaiah, a prophecy of the suffering servant. "Surely he hath borne our Grievs and carried our Sorrows; Yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of GOD and afflicted". The other was from Leviticus, "And the Goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a Land not inhabited". That is, the sins of the community, and their guilt for having committed those sins, shall be taken away to another place, the wilderness, where they will not be a constant reminder to God's people of how far they've fallen short of the ideal.

The scapegoat was chosen on a particular day of the year, the Day of Atonement, when the sins and guilt of the tribes of Israel would be expunged through sacrifice. He would atone for their sins, placed upon him would be the guilt of all the people and he would be driven into the wilderness, there no doubt to meet his end, alone and parted from his fellows.

So is this image one which fits Jesus on the cross, a sacrifice for the misdeeds of all the people? I don't think it is, but I think that it is the image of Jesus in the hours leading up to his crucifixion. What had happened up until then? He'd be greeted by singing and palm waving hordes of enthusiastic followers. His disciples had pledged their everlasting devotion and obedience "even unto death".

Now those same followers had turned their back on him. Were at least some of the people who had called him Lord and Master, and King, among those who now called upon the Roman Procurator to "Crucify him!". When they spat on him, flogged him, jeered him, despised him, were they giving vent to their own feelings of guilt? After all, what had he done? What was he doing? He'd let them down or had they let him down? Whatever, he was bearing their guilt, their guilt at not having his faith in the Father, at being shown what they could and should have been. They feared what would happen to them if they followed him, now that he was showing himself to be different from the conquering hero they'd welcomed with waving palm fronds and shouts of Hosanna!

And now he was being made to pay the price for making them feel so inadequate, so guilty. He was the scapegoat, bearing their sins and guilt away to another place, a wilderness where they did not have to follow.

And all this before he'd even reached the cross.

Let us pray.

Prayer : Father, we know our own problems are usually our own fault. We know that we are responsible for our own past, present and future. We know that you have given us a world in which we could live perfect lives. Help us to accept our own responsibility to do the right things in life, to "do all those good things which you have prepared for us to walk in". We will not look to blame others, but will look to Jesus' example, and draw on Jesus' strength, and with his help, bear our own guilt for the things we do wrongly, knowing that we can ask for your forgiveness. **Amen**

Hymn : Cleanse me from my sin, Lord....(MP82)

4 Personal sacrifice – Abraham and Isaac

Genesis 22 *And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.*

And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

The concept of 'sacrifice' demands that we offer something of value to ourselves. It is not just that someone else gains from the deal, but that WE lose. We have to give beyond our means, till it hurts.

In societies where human sacrifice was practised, it was considered both a privilege and a tragedy when it was your child that was chosen. So the story of Abraham and his son Isaac reads differently in the context of the society for whom it was written. Abraham and his wife Sarah had longed for a son, God had given him, and God was entitled to ask for him back. So Abraham was willing to take his only son and offer him to God, although it would break his heart.

Look at the details of the stories. Two loving Fathers lead their beloved sons up the same hill, while the boys both struggle under a heavy load of wood. The first son, Isaac, asks for reassurance, 'where is the lamb?' and his father replies 'God will provide the lamb for sacrifice'. The second son, Jesus, asks 'Father let this cup pass from me', and no reassurance is given. Because Jesus *is* the lamb God provided for Abraham, the lamb who takes the place of Isaac, and of all of us, the lamb caught among the thorns on the next peak of the Holy Mountain, on Golgotha, next to the rock of sacrifice.

The rock where Abraham took Isaac stands on Mount Moriah. Hundreds of years later, it was still the Holy Mountain. It was why the Jews fought, and still fight to take and to hold Jerusalem. It was the rock of the threshing floor which King David bought from King Ornan of the Jebusites in order to build the Temple. It was Mount Moriah, The Temple Mount, Haram al Sharif, opposite the peak of Golgotha, now Holy to Jews, Christians and Moslems The rock is now exposed beneath the golden dome of the Dome of the Rock, and is next to Golgotha, where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre covers the Mount of the Crucifixion and the empty tomb.

Two places of sacrifice on the same mountain top.

Abraham's sacrifice of his son signifies the end of human sacrifice and the start of Judaism as a faith which would later give rise to the faiths of Christianity and Islam.

God's sacrifice of *his* son turns the whole world upside down, and brings about the end of all blood sacrifice. The death and resurrection of Jesus signifies the start of a new covenant with all of humanity.

Prayer from the Epistle of St Peter

He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.
When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate.
When he suffered, he made no threats.
Instead, he entrusted himself to Him who judges justly.
He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree;
so that we might die to sin, and live to righteousness:
by his wounds, we have been healed. Amen

Hymn: All my life Lord MP 17

5. Saving Sacrifice: The Passover lamb

Exodus 12 *They shall take to them, every man, a lamb. The lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year, taken from the sheep or from the goats. And they shall take the blood, and strike it on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the house wherein they shall eat it, and they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire. With unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it.*

Matthew 26 V 26-28 *And as they were eating, Jesus took bread and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, saying 'Take, eat, this is my body'. And he took the cup, and gave it to them saying, 'Drink ye all of this, for this is my blood of the new testament which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins'.*

It is no coincidence that the trial and crucifixion of Jesus took place at the feast of the Passover. We know a lot about the Passover feast, we enacted it here last night, and we enact a part of it every time we celebrate the Eucharist. What are the requirements of a Passover lamb? It is the same as the lamb for sacrifice, young, without imperfection, disease or injury. The blood of the lamb should be smeared on the door posts and the lintel of the house.

The blood on the doorway marks the house as Israelite, so that the angel of death will pass over the household and spare the death of the firstborn son, which is the last plague to be visited on the Egyptians. The blood of the Passover lamb saves the first born sons of Israel.

The Feast of the Passover is the greatest feast in the Jewish calendar, and is strictly observed. All Jews wish to keep Passover in Jerusalem. It marks the liberation of the Israelites from slavery, and their recognition as an independent nation with the first Monotheistic faith and a constitution. The Passover lamb brings healing to the Israelites through the sprinkled blood on the doorposts, and freedom from slavery through the broken body.

Our Passover lamb, perfect and unbroken, was not a passive victim, like Isaac, like the scapegoat, like the daily temple sacrifices, the but a willing volunteer, a triumphant saviour who brings redemption from all sin for all people.

Prayer: Eastern Orthodox Church Hymn for Good Friday

Today he who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the cross.
He who is King of the angels is arrayed in a crown of thorns.
He who wraps the heavens in clouds is wrapped in the purple of mockery.
The bridegroom of the church is transfixed with nails.
The son of the virgin is pierced with a spear.
We venerate your passion, O Christ,
show us also your glorious resurrection.

Hymn: When I survey the wondrous cross. MP 755

6. The Lamb Triumphant

Revelation 5 v6-14: *And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth; and he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints; and they sang a new song, saying,*

*“Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God
from every tribe and tongue and people and nation,
and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on earth.”*

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, “To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Rev 6 : 15-17

Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?”

Throughout the readings, we've been presented with a picture of a suffering Jesus, willingly presenting himself as a sacrifice for the sin, wrongdoing and guilt of the people of Israel, and by extension, the people of the world. In Revelation, the final book of the new

testament, we're presented with a very different Lamb of God. The ascended sacrificial victim now occupies the throne of heaven, and oh boy, look out, because this Lamb is not taking any prisoners. We've had our chance, as has Jesus, and Jesus is the one who's shown himself to be worthy of God's favour.

This is a different sort of lamb, one who has done all that his father required of him. He has been tested and not found wanting. Now he is a lamb with a throne, on Mount Sion, not as a sacrificial victim, but as judge of the living and the dead. His are the final tests to deliver to humankind. Will we, his church on earth, live up to all the opportunities for redemption with which we have been provided?

Worthy is the lamb to receive power, might, honor, glory. What about us? Are we worthy to stand before his judgement? We want the forgiveness for our misdeeds, the freedom from guilt, the redemption. Are we using our transformed lives, hard won for us by Jesus' sacrifice, to extend his Father's kingdom? Because if we're not, Revelation suggests that we'd better watch out, because this lamb has teeth.

Let us pray.

Just as the lamb ascended to the throne of heaven is worthy to receive our complete surrender, and to rejoice in power, might, glory and praise, make us worthy of the redemption which he bought for us by dying on the cross. When he returns in glory, may we face his judgement with confidence. **Amen**

Hymn : You laid aside your majesty.....(MP795)

Conclusion

The different lessons - the lamb which is a sacrifice for our fallen condition, the lamb which is the scapegoat for our guilt, the lamb who in victory has ascended his Father's throne and rules over his kingdom with justice.

We are part of the continuing Jewish sacrificial tradition, but in Jesus that tradition received a transforming change of direction, meaning and impact. Does being a Christian make a difference? Yes. Is that difference rooted in the events, meanings and consequences of Good Friday and Easter? Yes.

In taking upon himself the role of Lamb of God, Jesus gave those who believe in him the opportunity not only to have their sins forgiven, daily, not only to have their sinful fallen nature transformed, but also to share in the victory of life in God's presence.

As a Vicar friend of ours used to say : I have been saved, I am being saved, and, through God's grace in Jesus Christ, I will be saved.

Behold the Lamb of God (Behold the Lamb of God),

Behold the Lamb of God (Behold the Lamb of God),

Who takes away the sins of the world. (from **John Bell**)

Blessing

Hymn : I love you, Lord, and I lift my voice....(MP287)

The Grace