

Behold the Lamb of God

The identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God is so familiar to us (from the service of Holy Communion; from Christian art; from Handel's *Messiah*) that we miss the unprecedented nature of the Baptist's declaration in John's Gospel: *Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*.

The Lamb of God: what does that mean? Where does that come from? It's not something we hear about in Matthew, Mark or Luke; certainly not from John the Baptist.

In one sense, of course, it comes from the Jewish scriptures, although not in a clear-cut way. A lamb was a sacrificial animal; but not the primary candidate associated with atonement, the removal of sin. When the letter to the Hebrews deprecates the repeated sacrifices which fail to take away sins, the writer refers to *the blood of bulls and goats*. The sacrificial animal on the Day of Atonement was a goat (partner to the scapegoat) not a lamb. The significant lamb in the Jewish scriptures is the lamb slaughtered at Passover: initially to provide the blood to ward off the destruction of the firstborn and subsequently, consumed in remembrance and celebration. But this was an act of redemption – liberating the Hebrews from slavery – rather than of atonement.

But that Passover connection is clearly what John has in mind (both the Baptist and the Evangelist). The feast of Passover has a recurring significance in St. John's Gospel, building up to Jesus' death on the cross, at the time the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple. This is the high point of the Gospel, the moment Jesus' mission was accomplished: *It is finished*. The Baptist's unprecedented declaration of Jesus as the Lamb of God really comes from the end of the Gospel: it is anticipatory, or written in retrospect: John sees in the new arrival a sign of his vocation to come.

This particular connection with Passover is also novel. True, Paul writes of *Christ our Passover*, being *sacrificed for us*, but doesn't dwell on identifying Jesus with the lamb: his focus is on the parallel feast of Unleavened Bread. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus dies a day later and the Last Supper is the Passover meal. Jesus draws significance from God's act of redemption to interpret his coming death; his blood marks the sealing of a new covenant: only in Matthew's version is this explicitly linked with the forgiveness of sins.

Yet we can see how these various strands come together in Jesus. In Jesus' ministry, forgiveness of sin was an invitation to a restored relationship with God and with others, thereby liberating people from guilt and estrangement. Human sin not just a personal matter: it prevents the world being what God intends it to be; overcoming sin is part of the process of redeeming his creation. For the paralysed man on his stretcher, forgiveness of sins was coupled with his healing, enabling him to rejoin the ranks of a disabling society. Zacchaeus and other hated tax collectors were given the opportunity to experience acceptance and grace from Jesus: resulting in Zacchaeus' case in a public promise to repay any he had defrauded. Unlike his host, Jesus welcomed his anointing by the unnamed woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee, because her showing much love demonstrated that her many sins had been forgiven. The invitation Jesus extended to those he encountered in his ministry – to receive forgiveness of sins – is extended to all when he is lifted up on the cross – as Jesus expresses it in John. He offers himself to *take away the sin of the world*.

The other New Testament book in which Jesus figures as the Lamb (also in the Johannine corpus) is Revelation. The throne in that vision is *the throne of God and of the Lamb*. The Lamb is worthy of that place because he was slain, and he continues to bear the marks of sacrifice. The ultimate victory over the powerful and evil beast comes through a vulnerable lamb, marked out for suffering – a source of encouragement to his equally vulnerable followers as they face the corruption and might of Rome.

In Revelation, Jesus is simply *the Lamb* (and a different Greek noun is used). The Baptist points to Jesus as *the Lamb of God*. *Of God* is significant: just as when Abraham was able to substitute a ram caught in a thicket for his almost-sacrificed son, Isaac, God has provided the lamb for the offering. When two people have fallen out with each other, one of them needs to make the first move towards reconciliation. Release from an unpayable and incapacitating debt comes from its lifting by the one who is owed. The reconciliation and forgiveness of sin that comes through Jesus is God's initiative; he makes the first move: Jesus is the *Lamb of God*.

The next day, John the Baptist points out Jesus to two of his followers: *Look, here is the Lamb of God*. His words are so arresting that they peel off and take up Jesus' invitation to spend the rest of the day with him. For us, it is when we spend time with him at the Holy Communion that we most powerfully encounter Jesus as the Lamb of God. Gathering around his table, with praise and thanksgiving we recall his saving death. Sharing his body and blood, we receive forgiveness of our sins. And then we offer ourselves *to be a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice unto God*, participating in his redemption of the world through our Lord Jesus Christ.