

THE LAMB OF GOD

Preached at St. Mary's 2011 Second Sunday Year A

At first sight it may seem that this Sunday is a re-run of last Sunday – the Baptism of Jesus described by St. John the Baptist but using St. John's Gospel, which does not actually describe the baptism. The focus is in the words:

Look, there is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.

So let us look at the words *the Lamb of God*, their meaning in scripture and how they are related to the Mass.

The Old Testament.

In the OT there are plentiful references to lambs and their symbolism.

1. There is the Passover lamb, referred to in Exodus. It was by smearing the blood of the sacrificial lamb on their lintels that the Jews survived the overshadowing of the Avenging Angel in Egypt.
2. Lambs were used frequently in ancient Jewish sacrificial worship. All of this ceased at the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 and is not a part of modern Judaism. But notably it was part of Jewish worship at the time of our Lord's early ministry.
3. Isaiah frequently uses the symbol of the Lamb:
 - (a) As a figure of innocence
 - (b) As needing care and protection
 - (c) As a sign of gentleness and peace

This morning in our lectionary there is a link between the Lamb of God and the suffering servant of Isaiah.

The New Testament

1. The Gospels

St. Luke uses the concept of us all being lambs among wolves [10:3] even to the point of being sacrificial victims, but in none of the synoptic Gospels is there any mention of Jesus as the Lamb of God.

St. John. It is solely in this Gospel that the concept of Jesus as the Lamb of God is developed. We have seen in our Gospel today that St. John the Baptist points to Jesus

Look, there is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world

Then we find [1:36] *Look here is the Lamb of God*

St. John develops this in his concept of the timing of the condemnation of Jesus before Pilate as the same as that at which the sacrificial lambs were being sacrificed for the Paschal feast.

2. The rest of the New Testament

St. Paul takes up the theme in I Corinthians 5:7:

For our Paschal lamb Christ has been sacrificed

Acts continues this theme in Acts 8.

It is even more powerful in 1 Peter 1:19:

Like the precious blood of Christ, like the lamb without defect or blemish

Hebrew's is full of this sacrificial language in relation to what Christ has done but there is no specific reference to Christ being the Lamb of God.

Revelation:-Many scholars think this came from the same school as St John's Gospel and that Revelation takes us a stage further. John has already taken us to

- (a) Jesus as the Paschal lamb
- (b) Jesus as the suffering servant of Isaiah
- (c) Finally in Revelations is described the Lamb of the Apocalypse. Here the Lamb is seen as the Resurrected and Ascended Christ.

The Lamb of God in the Mass

Notably the references here are found within the Mass of the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Lutheran traditions.

1. The Gloria

Outside Advent and Lent we have the Gloria with the words:

Lord God, Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us; you are seated at the right hand of the Father, receive our prayer.

This is part of the Liturgy of the Word, so is not part of the Eucharist itself.

Originally it was part of the Eastern Churches morning prayer, but by the 7th century had found its place in the Mass at Rome, but it was not until the 11th century that it spread to the rest of Western Liturgy.

2. Fraction

In the Eastern Church the breaking of bread (which takes place before the Liturgy starts) is symbolic of the passion and death of Jesus (the broken body of Christ). In the West the bread is referred to as the Hostia – the sacrificial Gift, hence the reference to **the Host**. By the seventh century in the West, there was a Litany sung as the host was broken up:

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, Miserere nobis

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

This was repeated several times until the fraction was complete – now formalized into a double repeat of the words. Then on the completion of the fraction is marked by the words:

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem

(Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace).

The sacrifice offered we can be at peace.

Then after personal prayer the priest genuflects and holds up the broken Host saying:
Ecce Agnus Dei (literally behold the Lamb of God).

It has to be remembered that at one time people received Communion infrequently and often only yearly – at Easter after confession and much preparation. It also has to be remembered that until 50 years ago the priest always celebrated Mass with his back to the people. The priest would ensure the elevation of the Host could be seen by all, by lifting it

high. It was a belief that a special blessing was received by catching sight of the consecrated Host. This was known as a *sacring*. This occurred both when the Host was elevated at the consecration and also when the Priest turned and said *Ecce Agnus Dei*. Here the meaning was *Behold the Lamb of God*, and this meaning persisted for centuries..

I might add it was also the custom for the priest to take a consecrated Host to those who were dying so they could look on it as they passed from life. Others would also go along for an extra *sacring*.

But now the meaning of *Ecce Agnus Dei* has developed into:

This is the Lamb of God – who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are we who are called to his supper.

This is **an invitation to partake** in the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is no longer a spiritual communion of gazing (*sacring*), but is actual (and frequent) receiving of Christ and partaking in his Passover sacrifice. We take Him into ourselves so that we may take him to the world.