

## **1) Sermon for Mattins on the 2nd Sunday of Epiphany, 15th Jan 2017**

### **1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42**

'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.' Are you clear about that? Do you know what John the Baptist was on about? Certainly a man from Mars might be struggling.

I want to talk this morning about seeing things, or rather people, for what they really are. John the Baptist said - twice - that he didn't know who Jesus was at first. Then 'he that sent me to baptise with water' said to John that whoever he saw being descended on from heaven by the Spirit, 'the same' - that one - 'baptizeth with the Holy Ghost'.

Park that scene in your mind for a moment. Before we start to wrestle with things descending from heaven, or lambs, or even lambs of God, I just want to pause and suggest that perhaps we ought not to be too worried about what happened 2,000+ years ago, when there is so much to challenge us happening now.

Perhaps people come to church almost as a way of getting away from the cares of the world. Brexit. Trump. The NHS crisis. What do we Christians do? We have a nice soothing service commemorating something in the church: the son of God, say. Manifesting, showing himself. Behold the lamb of God. Sounds comforting. A lamb. Almost cuddly. Much nicer than ranting politicians and worrying news bulletins.

But think about the man from Mars. Or maybe there's someone new here in church today, someone who honestly doesn't go to church much. Well, if you've never come across it before, frankly, what is a lamb of God? What's the relevance of these rather odd sounding ideas to modern life?

Ever since Bishop John Robinson published his book called 'Honest to God' in 1963, thoughtful Christians in this country have realised that God isn't very likely to be a man with a white beard sitting on a throne above the clouds. So if God isn't 'up there', how likely is it that He will send angels down as messengers from above?

Charles Wesley's 'Lo, He comes, with clouds descending' may be lovely words to have in a hymn - and of course they reflect the passage in St Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (4:15-17) where at the last trump, St Paul says that Jesus will descend from heaven, the dead will rise from the grave, and together with them we will all rise to meet the Messiah in the sky: but it surely don't describe how we think that God might work today. We really don't believe in a 'Spirit in the sky' any more, if we ever did.

So what about the lamb? It is the old Jewish idea of a scapegoat. See Leviticus 16:7-10. You metaphorically unloaded your bad things on to the back of a poor goat, who was then pushed out into the wilderness to fend for itself. It somehow took away the bad behaviour and hurt and alienation, by suffering for you.

Sometimes I've been to church services - the last one was called a 'U2charist', a Holy Communion where all the hymns were songs by the rock band U2, at St Martin of Tours in Epsom - where the congregation are invited to pick up something, like a pebble, say - and put it into a big bin or some other receptacle, and throw it away - as it were sacramentally, with the idea that the pebble was something, something you felt or did, that you wanted to get rid of.

Obviously it's better to chuck away a pebble than to turn a poor goat loose in the desert without shelter, food and water. But the idea is similar. The scapegoat, or the scape-pebble, is metaphorically taking away whatever it is you feel burdened by. I suppose if you accept the idea behind it, it might do you some good: who knows?

The idea is sometimes called 'substitutionary atonement'. Someone takes someone else's punishment for them. 'Greater love hath no man, than that he lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:13). Or much more recently, Fr Maximilian Kolbe, the Franciscan friar in Auschwitz, who volunteered to take the place of a man selected at random by the Nazis to die by starvation in reprisal for an escape.

Some people say that what Jesus did by dying on the cross was the same sort of thing. He died, it is said, as a sacrifice, a propitiation, to make up for our sins, so God would be pacified, would be content with the sacrifice and would spare us. That's what John the Baptist might have had in mind when he called Jesus the 'Lamb of God'.

The Prayer of Consecration in the Holy Communion service - on page 255 of your blue Prayer Books - 'Almighty God .. who didst give thine only son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption... who made there .. a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world..' - that has the same idea.

It's not an idea which liberal theologians feel comfortable with today. Why would a loving God want a human sacrifice - let alone a sacrifice of his own son? And anyway, we don't slaughter animals on altars any more. I can see the sort of logic when mankind was more primitive, maybe living hand-to-mouth in caves. Food - and sheep and goats were walking food - was precious. If God was the most important thing you knew - or at least God was

the most powerful, could do you the most good, or harm - then you wanted to keep him on side, to give Him something of the highest value - your walking food, your sheep or goat, ready for the oven - or indeed, if it was a 'burnt offering', ready cooked.

Anyway, what is 'salvation', these days? Being saved. Saved from sin. I think that some of us might have said, when we were children, perhaps, that 'salvation' was all about not really dying, and instead having eternal life. Certainly that comes into it: but although we may well accept that there is a sense in which there is a life after death - have a look at 1 Corinthians 15, for example - it's clearly not as simple an idea as suddenly stopping the population from dying at the end of their lives.

No, the idea is that you're saved from sin, from the consequences of your sins. You will be all right on the Day of Judgment: 'that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ', as St Paul puts it in his first letter to the Corinthians, in the passage that we had as the epistle, the lesson, today.

Sin isn't really just doing bad things. It isn't just breaking one or other of the Ten Commandments. The real sting of sin is that it is separation from God, or separation from God's way, the right path in life. I get to that this way. If God is the ultimate Creator, and if one can reasonably expect that his creation is good and right and well-conceived, breaking one or other of the Ten Commandments will tend to upset that good order in creation.

We were meant in creation to have stable lives - families. Children who would love their parents. Murder is obviously against the created order. Stealing likewise, and giving false evidence. That well-run created order will begin to look scruffy, unbalanced. Those sins - the Greek word means 'missing the mark' - drive a wedge between us and the well-ordered world which God made for us.

I would suggest that, these days, when we don't any more have sacrifices, or at least those sort of slaughtered animal sacrifices, what Jesus did, or what God in Jesus did, was to enter fully into human life - and to suffer the injustices that can ruin that life. He was condemned to death for a crime he didn't commit. God could have saved him: he could have saved himself - think of the temptations in the wilderness (Matthew and Luke, both chapter 4, Mark 1:13).

But God - or he himself, as God - didn't save himself. Because if he had done, he wouldn't have been a man, fully human. There were miracles, of course: turning water into wine. Even the resurrection itself. But the point is that Jesus was shown to us, it was his Epiphany to us. God had shown that He was involved with us. 'God in man made manifest' (Hymn 90).

Well, that takes us to the point where John the Baptist saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, identifying Jesus as the son of God, and the first people signed up to become followers - or rather, students, of this rabbi, or teacher. And they went round to Jesus' house, and spent time with him.

So where does that take us? Granted we can work out, with the help of a few commentary books, what the Bible says. But how do we relate to it? How do we become 'saved'? That's for you to ponder over this lunchtime. Or, if you look at your pew sheet, you'll see that the lessons from St John's Gospel this morning and tonight at Evensong are continuous. They run into each other.

First the lamb of God and the first two disciples. Then in the next bit, Nathanael, 'an Israelite .. in whom there is no guile'. What happened next? So you'll have to come tonight to hear the second chapter of my sermon. Until then, think about what you'd tell the man from Mars, about that Lamb.

## **2) Sermon for Evensong on the 2nd Sunday of Epiphany, 15th January 2017**

*Galatians 1:11-24; John 1:34-51*

This morning at Mattins I spoke about the earlier bit of this reading from the first chapter of St John's Gospel, and now this is by way of a second instalment.

John the Baptist had recognised Jesus for what he was, the Son of God, the 'Lamb of God', picked out, identified, demonstrated to be those things - because that is what the Greek word for Epiphany means - when the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove on to Jesus.

We chewed over what all these rather odd expressions - that the Lamb was in John's eyes a sacrificial lamb, a sort of scapegoat, following the old Jewish idea that you could somehow unload all your failures and mistakes, sins even, by putting them sacramentally, symbolically, on the back of a goat and sending it out without nourishment to die in the desert.

We thought that a good and kind God would not really want such a cruel sacrifice. That perhaps the prevalence of this idea of 'substitutionary atonement' in the Bible and in our liturgy rather reflects an earlier age, where there was powerful symbolism in giving away to God, sacrificing to him your main source of food in animal sacrifice.

We can understand that idea in theory, but, just as we now don't take literally the idea of 'heaven', and God with a white beard sitting above the clouds, we

can decide to take the idea of the sacrificial Lamb as a symbol. There is no gory end here. The lesson which we take from this image, the Lamb of God, is, instead, the reason why we describe our faith as 'revealed' religion. God in Jesus, in human form, has been revealed, shown - the Epiphany word again - to us. Just as we suffer injustice sometimes, so did Jesus. He was one of us.

The first part of our two lessons from St John, this morning's part, ended with the brothers Simon and Andrew leaving John the Baptist's followers and joining Jesus' 'gang'. Now in the final bit of the first chapter of St John's Gospel, we read about the next disciple coming in, Nathanael.

I remember when I was 5, between the ages of five and eight, I attended the Nottingham Girls High School pre-prep department. Don't worry, it doesn't mean that I have changed sex. It is one of the strange things that schools used to do. In girls' schools, when you were small enough, there were a few boys as well. There were six of us: Richard Stillman, Simon Stocker and his brother Mark, John de Ville, Nicky Boneham and me. Our class was therefore divided into six gangs. We, each of us boys, invited girls whom we thought suitable for our gang to hang around with us and in playtime our usual idea was to organise a pitched battle between our gangs. Only occasionally did we do things more peacefully, playing in the sandpit. Innocent things in the sandpit, I assure you. With a rather good model tractor, in my case.

Well here we are reading about the call of the first disciples. In this second part of the story, Jesus invited Philip into his 'gang': he said, 'Follow me', and he did. And Philip in turn brought his friend Nathanael in. There was a certain amount of rudery between the disciples about where each one had come from: the sort of thing that I as a Brummie had to get used to, all those years ago when I was working in Liverpool. It's the same sort of thing that all non-Londoners have to encounter down here in the soft South. How can there be anything good north of Watford? 'Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?' Well, Philip said, 'Come and see.'

So the disciples were starting to group together. The gang was being assembled. But as so often in the Bible, when you look at things a bit critically, you realise that there are massive bits of the story missing. In John's Gospel there is none of the birth story: no shepherds, no manger, no wise men, no Herod. When we first encounter Jesus, he's grown up. We don't know a lot more about what he has been up to. There is, of course, in Luke the time when he gave his parents the slip and turned up in the temple where he seemed to have been holding a seminar - and he was only 12 years old (Luke 2:43f). But now, fully grown, he has been recognised as the Messiah, as the Son of God, and he has started to get his own disciples, his own gang.

The really big gap which I would like to mention to everyone for further consideration is this: what did the disciples do next? Or, for that matter, what did Jesus do next? There they all were: the team is together. They are going around together. To some extent they will be doing some studying. They will be listening to Jesus explaining the Bible to them. But honestly, do you think that is all that it was? Do you think that they were just a bunch of travelling scholars? I would suggest to you that, if that had been the case, we really would not have heard of Jesus Christ and all the huge history of the Christians down through the last 2000 years. What were they all about?

St Paul wasn't with the early disciples, actually accompanying Jesus: but still Jesus was 'revealed' to him, as he says in his letter to the Galatians: 'But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace,

To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; ..' we remember how St Paul was made blind on the road to Damascus; how he had a conversion experience and went from being the Christians' chief persecutor to being their leading missionary. He had witnessed a huge epiphany. A huge showing of God in the person of Jesus. And what did he do? In St Paul's case, he went about preaching. Indeed in Saint Matthews Gospel Jesus gave the disciples the great commission – but I think that is later on.

I'm interested in what they did when they had Jesus with them. It's generally reckoned that it lasted about three years. This morning I mentioned Bishop John Robinson and his rather revolutionary book, *Honest to God*, in the early sixties, and how he had challenged the idea that God was a little old man with a beard sitting on top of the clouds. Indeed, John Robinson followed the German-American theologian Paul Tillich in suggesting that a better way of understanding the nature of God was to think of God as being, as well as the ultimate creator, the heart of our being, the life force, the ground. Without God, without us being able to anchor ourselves in the ground, we would not have our life.

And I was saying that salvation, saving us from sin, consists in getting us back in touch with God, bringing us back, grounding us in his love. Sins are the things that take us away from God. If the creator and sustainer of our world has demonstrated that he is interested in us, by sending Jesus, God is not just an impersonal unmoved mover. He is a man, was a man, like us.

That must mean that the kingdom of God isn't some Shangri-La above the clouds, but it is a world where there was a new Jerusalem, 'a new heaven and a new earth, the holy city, new Jerusalem made ready like a bride adorned for her husband. Now at last God has his dwelling among men. He will dwell among them and they shall be his people and God himself will be

with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There shall be an end to death, to mourning and crying and pain; for the old order has passed away.'

And again, it's what we pray for in the holy communion service in Common Worship: 'send us out in the power of your spirit to live and work to your praise and glory' or, 'Keep us firm in the hope that you have set before us, so that we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name.' Or in the Eucharistic Prayer (E):

'Lord of all life  
Help us to work together for that day  
When your kingdom comes  
And justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth.'

It's very practical. It may not be that we somehow win our place in the kingdom by doing good works: but as St Paul explained later on in his letter to the Galatians, you become 'under the Spirit': he says, '.. the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance.' Those must have been the qualities that the disciples were demonstrating.

If you start to be filled with the Spirit - which is one aspect of God, after all - in this way, then people will start to notice. People will start to feel the power of the Good News, of God with us.

So we will become like Nathanael, 'without guile', good people. Then, with John the Baptist, they saw Jesus, the Lamb of God. Now much later, in Jesus' gang, then among his disciples, now as members of his church, in ourselves, in each other we can see him again, in his Holy Spirit at work. Let's make room for Him. God is with us.