

**Easter 3**  
**10/4/2016**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Acts 9:1-6**

**Psalm 30**

**Revelation 5:11-14**

**John 21:1-19**

### **Worthy is the Lamb!**

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Rob Gallacher

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“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!” (Revelation 5:12)

The Scriptures have many references to the Lamb, and they all have different meanings and nuances. I’m going to reduce them to two.

1. The Lamb as sin bearer, the agent in atonement, as in John 1:29. Jesus is introduced in the words of John the Baptist “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”
2. The Lamb upon the throne, the victor over evil, the only one who is worthy, as in our text from Revelation.

These are the two meanings picked up in the liturgical response we know as the Agnus Dei:

1. Jesus, bearer of our sins, have mercy on us
2. Jesus, redeemer of the world, grant us peace.

These two themes are expressed visually in the 11<sup>th</sup> century engraving on the cover of the Order of Service:

1. The blood from the wound of the slaughtered Lamb flows into the communion chalice – a direct link between the sacrifice of Christ, and the restoration of our relationship with God through the sacrament. Jesus, bearer of our sins.
2. With its legs, the Lamb opens the scroll. In the imagery of Revelation, only the Lamb is worthy to break the seals on the scroll, for as soon as it is opened the evils of the world rush out, for example, when the first seal is broken a white horse is loosed, with its armed rider coming forth, conquering and to conquer. The Lamb of God can handle this.

When the Lamb is such a powerful image it seems curious that the sixth Ecumenical Council, in 692, should see fit to ban it. The argument seems to have been that the purpose of your devotion is to incorporate you directly into the life and being of God. In Colossians it says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, so the Lamb is then the image of the image of God. That is, it actually distances you from the being of God, as Father, Son and Spirit.

Distancing ourselves from the holy is something we are good at. I give you an example: Henri Nouwen once described a typical interview with a student wanting to talk about a problem. After a time, Nouwen would say, “Have you prayed about it?” and the reply would be “Well, I’ve thought deeply about it.” “Yes, but have you prayed about it?” “Oh, I have talked about with several people like yourself.” “But have you prayed about

it? Have you laid it all out before the Lord Jesus Christ and listened to what He might have to say to you?"

In the icon school it is not unusual for people to paint angels. When I query this, they say, "I can't bring myself to come so close to Jesus that I could paint his face. I'm more comfortable painting angels."

The *Angus Dei* does not offer any avoidance or easy escape: "Jesus, Lamb of God, bearer of our sins, have mercy on us." It is for this reason that I have trouble with the decision of the 6<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council. I might say that it is not unusual for me to have trouble with the decisions of the councils of the church. But in this case I am in good company. The Pope at the time, Sergius, didn't like it either. In 697, 5 years after the Council, he borrowed the *Agnus Dei* from the Syrian Church and inserted in the liturgy in deliberate defiance of the Council's ban. And it has stayed there ever since, usually right at the moment when we take the bread and wine.

So the image of the Lamb stays, reminding us that it is the wounded Christ who is raised up to sit on the throne. In icons of the Resurrection, or Christ Pantocrater, I always make sure the wounds are visible. It is the crucified, slaughtered Lamb who is on the throne, not another version of the Emperor, or the rider on the white horse.

While John the Divine uses obscure language in Revelation, he is in no way avoiding the issue. As the seals are broken, war, violence, death, corruption are loosed - all the things that fill our news broadcasts today. For all our human cleverness we still have to overcome a troubled world. So we have an enquiry, do research, pass laws and spend money, but none of these efforts is worthy. Only the Lamb can handle these things. Christians testify to a different way.

John, in the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel, announces Jesus as the Lamb who bears our sin. Then he re-arranges the timing of the crucifixion so that it coincides with the slaying of the lambs for the Passover, all 30,000 of them. The original gospel finished at chapter 20, so the climax is Thomas seeing the wounds and saying "My Lord and my God". We do fairly well when it comes to allowing the wounded Christ, the Lamb, to bear our sins. We receive forgiveness and take the cup, blood from his wounds, and it is direct and powerful.

But it is more of a challenge to confess the Lamb as the redeemer of the world. When we get involved with the affairs of the world it is difficult to be ruled by the Lamb. For example, if you were to probe the complexities of the world financial system it is likely that some of your superannuation funds are invested in corrupt practices that favour the rich at the expense of the poor. You might even rate a mention in the Panama files. Or if you are going to serve the community you will tangle with Government regulations. And if you enter the sphere of politics you will compromise to survive. There's bound to be tension between the will of the party and the way of the Lamb.

The Lamb that breaks the seals is a bit like a whistle blower. Exposing the evil that rules usually wounds the one who exposes it. That white horse that comes forth, conquering and to conquer, has very powerful weapons.

Even in the affairs of our own church, with the property decisions before us, I wonder about the power of that green line on the graphs, and wonder what the Lamb of God upon the throne might have to say about it. Is it as predictable as the forecasts presume?

I said John's gospel finishes at chapter 20 with Thomas, but there is chapter 21 – composed to put Peter in a better light than leaving him in his denial and flight from the

cross.

Since it is today's lectionary reading, I'd better do something with it. I'm going to ask you to use your imagination and listen to it with the Revelation text in mind, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might." Just try to see a picture, and then you can make of it what you will.

Imagine a boat, and the boat is the church. It is filled with the leaders of the church, the disciples. People who have walked with Jesus, seen the vision, encountered the risen Lord, but retreated under pressure and reverted to their old ways, their professional skills, the ways of the world. They have gone fishing. They work all night, plying their trade, but with no result. Enter Jesus, the wounded risen Lord. He says, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answer "No." So he says, "Try doing it my way. Fish from the other side of the boat, the right side." They cast their net on the right side, and they are not able to haul it in. The structures they have built are not able to contain the harvest. Peter puts on clothes, like new clothes after baptism, jumps out of the flimsy, inadequate craft, and goes to meet the Lord. Then they all feast together on the shore.

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