

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalm 40

John 1:29-42

Christ, lamb or shepherd

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

What did the Baptizer mean when he saw Jesus and said, 'Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'?

This has become one of the ordinals of the Eucharist, one of the texts that are common to every communion liturgy. These texts include the *Kyrie* (Lord have mercy), the Creed, and the *Sanctus* (Holy, holy, holy).

One of the activities that gives meaning in my life is singing in choirs. This is given me many opportunities for singing Latin masses. They always conclude with the *Agnus Dei* – *Agnus Dei qui tolis peccata mundi, miserere nobis* (Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us). It repeats this twice except the last time the *miserere nobis* is replaced with *dona nobis pacem* (give us peace).

Modern English versions of this can be seen in the liturgies of all the major Western churches including the Uniting Church, 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.'

For a metaphor like 'lamb of God' there needs to be some context or it does not make sense. This particular image can be a bit confusing because a much stronger image in the gospels, that is to say a much more frequently used image for Jesus, is that of shepherd. Matthew, Mark and Luke think 'shepherd' when they think of Jesus. Only John also thinks 'lamb' and only in the portion we heard this morning.

Understanding New Testament concepts often relies on knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. I remember a visiting teacher of liturgy telling us that if you need to leave out any of the set readings on a Sunday, don't drop the Old Testament one. We can't understand the gospels without knowing the Hebrew Scriptures.

That is certainly true for this metaphor of the lamb. However, we could start on this one without any ancient context to build on. The context of the story on its own stimulates interest and raises the eyebrow. John the Baptizer has been preaching that someone greater than he is coming along to step his mission to a higher level. In the next breath he points at the man he is talking about and calls him the lamb. Not the lion or the bear or the elephant but the lamb.

John the gospel writer talks of Jesus as lamb only this once, but John the Theologian in Revelation calls Jesus the Lamb 26 times. We could write a few doctoral theses on whether the writer of John's gospel and that of Revelation are the same person, but the lamb metaphor does provide a link.

So, what was happening in the Hebrew Scriptures to help us understand what John was thinking? There are three that I have found and together they provide some of the richness and complexity for grasping the work of Jesus and his nature. Let's go backwards through the books. This morning we heard part of the first of the Songs of the Suffering Servant of the prophet Isaiah. In Passiontide we often hear from the fourth Song of the Suffering Servant that includes the lines, 'He was oppressed, and he was

afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.’ (Isaiah 53:7)

We are reminded of Jesus’ silence at his trials. John is also the one who records Jesus’ words, ‘For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.’ (John 10:17-18) Was John thinking of Jesus’ posture of silence before his accusers, his doing nothing to prevent his death is why we speak of Jesus’ self-giving for the sake of the world?

Let’s go back further to the book of Exodus, to the Passover lamb that was to be killed and eaten before the journey of escape. The blood of the lamb is given graphic mention in this story, but it is not sacrificial blood. This blood of this lamb is to be daubed on the door posts and lintels so that the angel of death will pass over the houses so marked, but the first born of households not marked with blood will be killed that night. John the Theologian lays great store on the efficacy of the blood of the lamb to maintain life for the faithful. Is this what John the Evangelist had in mind? Now to unwrap all that Revelation means of how the blood of the lamb works for the good of humanity would require a few more PhDs, so let’s leave it there.

Go back to Genesis to the strange and disturbing story of Abraham offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice. At the last moment a lamb caught in a thicket provides the substitute sacrifice. Was John thinking of Jesus whose death is our deserving?

Well, we don’t know what John the Evangelist was thinking or what John the Baptist was thinking when Jesus was named the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He did not go on to say, ‘Now, what I mean by ...’ and then give a detailed explanation so that what it means is this or that and nothing else. It is the power of poetry, music, parables and metaphors that they do not nail down the truth but allow emotions, current contexts and the movement of the Spirit of God to shape and reshape how we know what God has done and what God is doing and the life of Jesus in our world.

However the ancient texts of our Jewish heritage tell it, the image of the lamb as a metaphor for God’s love and desire and power to save us points to weakness and vulnerability. God’s saving act in Jesus is so risky. Put the salvation of the world in the life of a human born into a world where the geopolitics and religious extremism is rife – what could possibly go wrong. A world so familiar to our own – what can possibly go wrong.

We know that just about everything can go wrong. That is one of the facts that prompts us into prayer. The churches in the Northern Hemisphere are praying for unity this week. Today marks the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Well may we pray for Christian unity because if the church is better at one thing than another it is disunity. Did you know that tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr Day, a day when the US remembers a saint of the church who preached and prayed and dreamt unity? The calendar of special prayer days asks us to remember the sin and trauma of the past, and this amidst current trauma of geopolitical chaos and natural disasters that would be less disastrous if we cared for the planet.

What goes wrong in our world yesterday, today and probably tomorrow? Just about everything. So we place our hope and trust in the vulnerable Christ who does not avoid his own destruction, who is caught in the thickets of the world gone mad, who marks humanity for life – to this one we pray:

Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, give us peace – give us peace.
