

# The Lamb of God

a sermon preached on the

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lections: Isaiah 49:1-9; John 1:29-42

Today's text from John's gospel is both an early departure from Matthew in this liturgical 'Year A', and may also strike us as an odd text in these Epiphanytide days. To appreciate the logic of the lectionary we need to remind ourselves of the meaning of the word 'epiphany'. It is from the verb which means 'to show', 'to shine', 'to become visible', 'to appear', 'to reveal'. In the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures its most common use is generally associated with mighty demonstrations of God's interventions. This alerts us to the fact that today's text from John, like the gospels over the last two Sundays, has something to do with a showing, a making visible of something new, something mighty.

What is being shown? The Baptist sees Jesus coming towards him and declares: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."<sup>1</sup> The something, then – more properly, the some-one – that is being shown is the Lamb of God who takes away sin of the world. Now it's important to keep in mind that for John's audience there would have been nothing unexpected about the reality of a Lamb of God which somehow causes sin to be taken away. That fact, in itself, would not have been news. Remember, this is the people whose defining story is the Exodus, the liberation from bondage in Egypt, the night on which door posts are daubed with lamb's blood, the night which inaugurates the most important liturgical action for the children of Israel. These people knew about lambs and the efficacy of blood. They knew about sin and the means by which God dealt with it. The moment the Baptist employs the lamb symbol he was evoking in the memories of his audience Jewish atonement theology. That word 'Lamb' was symbolic short-hand for an entire edifice, summarising a mass of theories, structures, assumptions, politics, economics, culture and liturgy. Everyone knew what happened in the Jerusalem Temple and that it was fundamental to their whole way of life. But when John the Baptist points at Jesus and describes *him* as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world he is actually saying something quite explosive – shocking and appalling in a way which it's difficult for us to appreciate.

To understand something of that shock it is necessary to be acquainted with First Temple liturgy. The essential elements are these:<sup>2</sup> Ancient cultures of many types had created ritual mechanisms for dealing with human sin, which generally depended upon appeasing an angry god who required a price to be paid for whatever sin had been committed. This usually meant human sacrifice. This sacrificial system had already been revolutionised in the Hebrew dispensation, as the story of Abraham and Isaac reveals, replacing the sacrifice of humans for goats or lambs.<sup>3</sup> Most likely, when we read all those accounts of the slaughter of tens of thousands of beasts in the Jerusalem Temple we imagine that this was merely a 'primitive' religion in which the Jews were appeasing the angry 'Lord of Hosts' with torrents of blood and clouds of acrid smoke – that is certainly how christian propagandists and proselytisers have portrayed our parents in the faith. I confess that this is the prejudice I inherited and which infected my preaching earlier in my ministry.

In fact, the First Temple liturgy – with which Jesus and his disciples would have been well acquainted – actually represented a tremendous breakthrough in both the conception of God and the mechanism of atonement. This point cannot be over-emphasised, particularly in the light of centuries of christian anti-Semitism and prejudice, not helped by our reference to the Hebrew Scriptures as the 'Old Testament'. The surprising truth is that beasts were *not* killed in the Temple to appease an angry and bloodthirsty god. The High Priest did *not* go into the Holy of Holies to offer a sacrifice to a fierce God. Actually the very opposite was the case!

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:29

<sup>2</sup> The outline that follows is thoroughly indebted to the chapter entitled "An Atonement Update" in James Alison, 2006, *Undergoing God: dispatches from the scene of a break-in*, New York: Continuum, pp50-67.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 22

This is so unexpected, and so contradicts our religious assumptions, that it requires some explanation. The High Priest, having confessed his own sinfulness, put on a white robe before entering the Holy of Holies, a white robe, representing an angel. In this liturgy the High Priest ceases to be human, becoming an angel, putting on the 'Name', the unpronounceable Name represented by the four letters יהוה YHWH, spoken by the faithful Jew as 'Adonai'. In the Holy of Holies the High Priest becomes, therefore, an emanation of YHWH. Now a critical element of this liturgy is that two lambs, or goats, are chosen by lot, the one designated as 'the Lord', the other as 'Azazel', the devil. <sup>4</sup> The latter is the 'scapegoat', on whom all the sins of the people are projected, who is then driven outside the city to die, taking the people's sins away. But our interest for the moment is in the former, the lamb which represents the Lord. The High Priest, the emanation of YHWH, would then take this lamb into the Holy of Holies, where he would slaughter it, sprinkle its blood on the Mercy Seat, the place of propitiation. <sup>5</sup> This action removed all impurities from this sacramental-liturgical space, symbol of the place where the Creator dwelt, the Holy of Holies, beyond and outside creation, beyond time and space.

Now what happens next is the key to this Jewish religious paradigm shift. The High Priest, acting in the person of YHWH, emerges from the Holy of Holies, passing through the Temple veil – signifying the Holy One entering the world, the creation, entering time and space – and, sprinkling all the rest of the Temple with the Lord's blood, thus liberating the world. The amazing thing about this, therefore, is that atonement does not consist in the priest appeasing an angry God – quite unlike widespread christian expectation. Rather, Jewish atonement is the opposite; it is the gracious God entering the world. The movement is not inwards, *sinner towards the Holy of Holies*. The movement is outwards, the *gracious God coming out from the Holy of Holies*. The picture we have of atonement, that God's anger must be satisfied, is therefore not only pre-christian but also pre-Jewish, a thoroughly pagan notion. The great leap of First Temple Judaism is that the gracious God takes the initiative of breaking through, coming towards humankind, coming into the world.

So all of that is essential background to today's gospel text, none of it surprising to Jesus' disciples and John's first hearers for whom this was familiar atonement theology. But the Baptist's statement would have raised more than eyebrows among his first hearers because he was making the astounding claim that *Jesus was this Lamb!* That was a shocking thing to claim. For it would mean that there would no longer be any need for the Temple and for the slaughter of lambs because Jesus had become *the Lamb*, the living Passover Lamb, the Paschal Lamb. The whole Temple machinery would become superfluous. In aligning himself with outcasts, sinners, the poor and lowly, and in accepting the path of crucifixion Jesus is the true High priest – the true emanation of YHWH – joining liturgy and ethical action, going to 'the Temple' outside the city walls, the dung heap known as Golgotha, where he would be the 'Lamb'. His cry from the cross – 'It is completed' – means that atonement is completed. <sup>6</sup> The space between the two angels in the empty tomb is the mercy seat of the Holy of Holies from which Jesus the Paschal Lamb has emerged into the world. <sup>7</sup> Note that it is not Jews, religious insiders who are liberated, but the **κόσμος** *cosmos*, the whole world, <sup>8</sup> which is, of course, the fulfilment of the prophet's insight that the anticipated One would be light to the nations. <sup>9</sup> The Holy of Holies is therefore now permanently open, for all time and for all people!

Can we see how tremendously unexpected and important this is? For this is the reversal of infantile pagan religion which requires an angry God. Thus is God's astonishing plan shown, revealed, made manifest, become visible. Now, not only is God overturning – like the Temple tables <sup>10</sup> – the sacrificial system such that sacrifices are no longer needed, coming instead to us, emerging from the Holy of Holies – now God, in Jesus the Lamb, has opened the Holy of Holies, taking away the sins of the world permanently. This is indeed a tremendous epiphany, which transforms our relationship with God and the world! This is gospel, **εὐαγγέλιον** *evangellion*, very good news indeed. This gospel we affirm in the heart of the eucharistic action when the gracious sacramental Body and Blood enters the real time and space of our world, coming unexpectedly towards us, entering us, becoming one of us: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

[david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz](mailto:david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz)

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<sup>4</sup> **אזאזל** *Azazel* Leviticus 16:8,10,16

<sup>5</sup> **ἱλαστήριον** *hilastērion* eg. Hebrews 9:5

<sup>6</sup> John 19:30

<sup>7</sup> John 20:12

<sup>8</sup> John 3:29

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 49:6

<sup>10</sup> John 2:14-22