

“Jesus Christ the Lamb of God”

A sermon on John 1:29-42 by John Fowler, 15 January 2017

Message

“Jesus Christ the Lamb of God”: These are such familiar words. We sing them almost every Sunday - but do we really understand what they mean or have they just become another Christian cliché for us?

Sermon

Wow! Hasn't Jesus gown up quickly in Year A of the Lectionary cycle! Just 3 weeks ago we were acknowledging and celebrating his birth. However, there's little recorded about his childhood days and his growing up. In tonight's – and last week's reading - he's probably about 28 or 29 years of age – and about to begin his formal/recorded ministry.

Last week's reading was about the Baptism of Jesus and Margie Dahl reminded us that Baptism is a magnificent gift to be received with wonder and joy for ultimately it is God's chosen means of self giving to us.

In tonight's Gospel reading, John was baptising again in the Jordan River. He saw Jesus coming toward him and declared amongst other things - according to Nathan's paraphrasing - “Here he is; God's own sacrificial lamb who takes away the sin of the world.” Traditional translations read: “Behold! Jesus Christ the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

This title of “Lamb” is probably the most popular image of Jesus.



The people of Jesus' day were very familiar with sheep and lambs. They bred them, they shepherded them, they ate them and they sacrificed them.

But what does "Lamb of God" mean? Is this a literal statement of fact, is it symbolism, is it a metaphoric reference or is it prophetic? It is a complex issue – and it's one of those

concepts that has caused conflict, controversy and confusion for theologians and believers alike.

“Jesus Christ the Lamb of God”. These are such familiar words: we sing them almost every Sunday - but do we really understand what they mean – or have they just become another Christian cliché for us?

A foundational doctrine of the Christian faith has been that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ paid the penalty for the sin (or sins?) of humankind—and that without this act of love by the Son of God, humanity had no hope of life after death.

However, it can be a difficult image for us because we are far removed from the Temples of Sacrifice that required the slaughter of lambs and/or other animals or birds in Jesus’ time – according to Jewish religious culture. Although our sensitivities about animal slaughter are greatly heightened these days, we as long-term Christians don’t often cringe when we read the words: “He was led like a lamb to the slaughter” as predicted in Isaiah.



Sacrifice was about spilling someone else's blood. And the most difficult part for us to understand is that the slaughter of these lambs provided a function for their society which they deemed essential.

But why is/was the sacrifice of Jesus Christ necessary for us?

The designation “Lamb of God” reflects back to the time when Israel was delivered from ancient Egypt under the direction of Moses. Before the 10th plague - the death of the firstborn - Israelite families had been instructed to kill a lamb and brush its blood on the top and sides of the door frames of their dwellings. The lamb that was slain for this purpose was called the Passover Lamb, and the observance of this ceremony became known as the Passover.



During that first Passover in Egypt, God was willing to accept the blood of the Passover Lamb on the door lintels of the Israelites' dwellings in place of the blood of their firstborn children. When the "Angel of Death" saw the "Blood of the Lamb" on the door lintel they passed-over that dwelling without killing the first born of the household. The households without the "Blood of the Lamb" on their door lintels lost their first-born to the "Angel of Death"! The blood of this lamb thus enabled the Israelites to escape the penalty that was coming upon the land of Egypt. (Exodus 12:21-24)

Passover became an annual observance in Israel so that they would remember how God delivered them from death. Historically, Passover marks the national liberation of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery.

The experiences of ancient Israel all looked forward to even more important spiritual lessons for Christians. Jesus Christ became the Passover Lamb for the Christian Church. The apostle Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 5:7, "For indeed Christ - our Passover - was sacrificed for us."

The importance of lambs in Jesus' day was at the Temple. The Temple was the place that gave meaning and order to their lives. It was where they were at. They believed that God abided in the Temple and gave order to things to make their places of abiding more peaceful and meaningful. And it was in the Temple on a regular basis that they sought forgiveness for their sins by making a blood sacrifice of a bull, or a lamb or a goat or a bird – depending on the level of the gravity of their sin – and their socio-economic status.

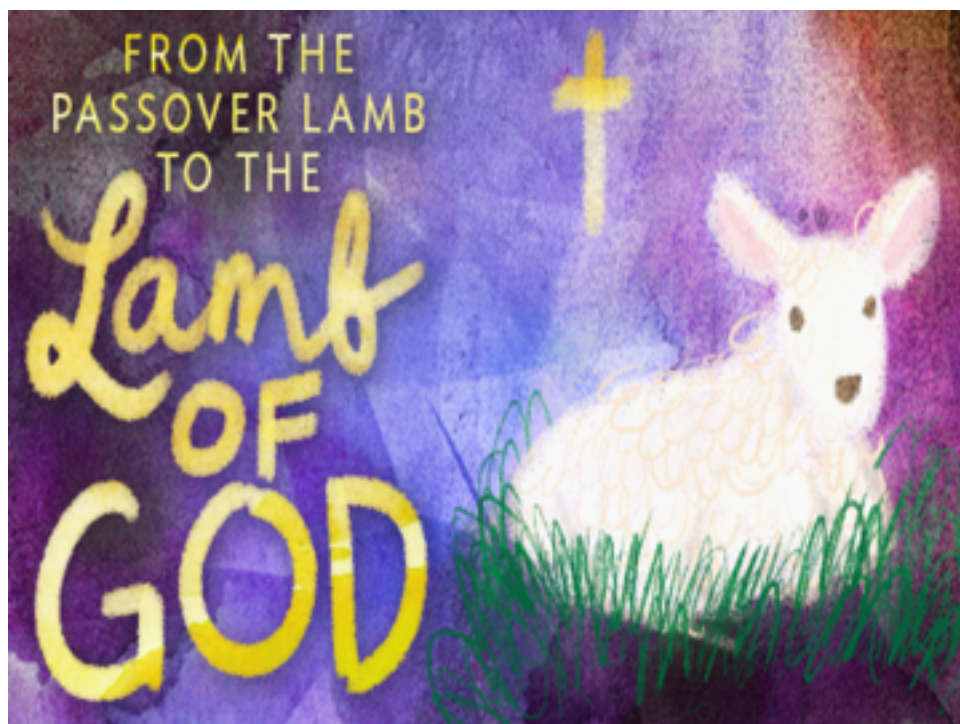
But annually – at Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement - the Jewish people practised another ancient ritual as prescribed in the Torah. The liturgy for Yom Kippur required them to take two animals – usually one goat and one lamb – to the High Priest as an Atonement offering. The people prepared for this sacred moment by performing appropriate behaviours – fasting, a cleansing fire, refraining from any labour for a day and ostentatious displays of penitence,

Once all of this ritual purification was complete one of the animals was chosen by lot to be slaughtered – and was then placed on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies – the place where God was said to dwell in the Temple – and which the High Priest entered on this one day of the year only. Sometimes the blood of the sacrificed lamb was sprinkled on the people who could then claim that they had been “washed by the blood of the Lamb of God”. They then felt cleansed of their sinfulness, accepted and at-one-ment with God. Symbolically people only had access to God through the blood of the Lamb. The concept of “Substitutionary Atonement” taught and believed by many Christians was derived from this practice.

The whole sacrificial system described in the Old Testament shaped the way people interpreted the coming of Jesus Christ, who was the perfect sacrifice God would provide as atonement for the sins of the people, and this is to be continued into the future according to some prophecies recorded in the book of Revelation where John the Revelator describes Jesus as the Lamb of God literally but also brings to mind his purity and humility of life during his first advent, and his blessed sacrifice on our behalf.

When the first part of the Yom Kippur liturgy was complete, the second animal was then taken to the High Priest – and all the sins of the people were symbolically transferred to this animal – who was then taken out into the wilderness and released – taking the sins of the people with it. The book of Leviticus refers to this animal as the “scapegoat.” Through these sacrificial rituals – the “Blood of the Lamb” and the “Scapegoat” - the people were “purified” of their sin!

Mark’s Gospel adds a Yom Kippur connection by interpreting the crucifixion as a “ransom” offered for many. Jesus, like the sacrificial lamb, is seen as paying the ransom required and therefore no further punishment is necessary.



The Gospel of John – which we heard from tonight - was probably written about 40 years after the crucifixion. John the Baptist refers to Jesus with words taken directly from the Yom Kippur Liturgy “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

So, how do we – in the 21st century - interpret the concept of the “Lamb of God”? Is it for us literal, symbolic, metaphoric or prophetic? I think a variety of interpretations is acceptable – as long as our understanding and interpretation helps us to accept Jesus’ sacrifice personally.

I am a proponent of the KISS principle:

KeeP

It

Simple

Saints

Don’t complicate the issue. I have a very simple faith. We may never all agree on what the words “Jesus Christ Lamb of God” mean – or on what the concept infers or involves. But I don’t think that really matters.

To me what is important is that during his life and ministry on this earth Jesus made a difference. He changed the way people thought. He challenged the status quo of the day. He changed the way people behaved. He provided acceptance and hope for those who were discriminated against and those who were marginalised. He made a difference to people’s lives – and their futures. He gave them hope.

The paramount thing is that Jesus has made a difference to us – and potentially can and will do the same to the lives of all people. By acknowledging and accepting Jesus we are assured of forgiveness and the assurance of the hope of eternal life. And we need to share that Good News with others.

Jesus entered the world not to partake of the Passover, but to become the Passover. Because of the fulfilled prophecies of Isaiah, a human race that once lived in darkness can now move forward with hope.

At the moment of sacrifice, the Lamb – Jesus Christ - leapt from the finite to the infinite, and takes us with Him! An indisputable witness to the divinity of Jesus Christ.

May we forever believe and proclaim: “Here he is: God’s own sacrificial lamb. You take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on us!” Amen.