

GOD'S LAMB VICTORIOUS

15th January 2017

Mayfield Salisbury

Today we move from the wise men to the baptism of Christ and, after the baptism, to the words of John, by whom he had been baptised. John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.

This John saw Jesus coming unto him, and said, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

Let me attempt brief definitions or interpretations of three words or phrases in that saying attributed to John the Baptist. The first is Lamb of God, the second is sin and indeed sin of the world, and the third is to ask what it means to say that the Lamb takes away the sin of the world.

The background to the term Lamb of God is varied, and firmly within the Hebrew scriptures. Lambs were killed and eaten as part of the annual Passover observance, when Jews recalled their liberation from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, around 2000BC, when the lambs blood was sprinkled on the doorposts of the house, and the rest of the lamb eaten. The Lord God seeing the blood on the doorposts passed over their houses, but smote the others - thus they benefited from the divine pass-over. Christ the liberator may form part of the significance of the phrase.

The powerful words of the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah may also play their part. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. That whole chapter became central to the Christian understanding of Christ's meaning and significance vicarious suffering, he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, with his stripes we are healed.

There is also the powerful picture of Abraham setting out to sacrifice Isaac, his son, who innocently asks where is the lamb for the burnt offering and Abraham replies, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering. These words remained powerful in Israel, and could be applied to Jesus, as the lamb provided to be sacrificed - in his case, the self-giving of his life.

There is also the scapegoat, sent into the wilderness to carry the sins of the people, and the burnt-offerings of lambs in the temple every day.

All these associations, or a mixture of them, may have been in the mind of Saint John as he wrote; yet perhaps even more central was the Lords Supper which by the time of his writing had become the central weekly action of the church, and which carried the connection with the Passover including the shedding of blood.

The Lamb of God is indeed a powerful term, used in this fourth Gospel but not in any of the other three.

When we think of sin, the possibility is that in popular speech the word sin ^{â€™} refers to specific acts, breaking rules of morality or behaviour; but the Biblical notion is of separation from God, idolising what is not worthy of worship, and self-centredness. Martin Luther wrote of sinning as *curvatus in as* being turned in upon oneself.

According to such an understanding it seems possible be sinful and yet to be breaking none of the moral rules.

The sin of the world then speaks of the worlds trust in itself, of worshipping what is not God, treating as ultimate things that are not truly ultimate. There need not be a division between such a definition of sin and doing wrong or wicked or prohibited deeds, but the specific fits into the larger, deeper, more general understanding of sinfulness.

When we ask how Jesus is thought of as the one who takes away the worlds sin, two answers come to mind. The first is that part of the expectation of the Messiah involved the Messiah - anointed one, Christ - bringing in a world where sin is no more, and people are united again with God.

The second takes into account that by the time St John was writing St Paul had written his epistles, which certainly included the imagery of animal sacrifice as a way of making meaning or sense of Christs life and death. Professor James Dunn in his large book, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, suggests that the shedding of animals blood is not a way of interpreting Christs significance which appeals to people like us.

He writes: One of the most powerful images used by Paul to explicate the significance of Christs death is that of the cultic sacrifice, or more precisely the *sin offering* which could be offered up by individuals and groups in the Jerusalem temple, and the annual Day of Atonement sacrifices. Equally, it has been one of the most repellent features of Pauls (and early Christian) theology for modern readers. The idea of bloody sacrifice and of divine-human relationships being somehow dependent on it is generally abhorrent to post-Enlightenment culture, something to be consigned to a more primitive and cruder period of conceptualization of divine-human relationships. However, it does not seem possible to deny either Pauls use of sacrificial imagery or its centrality to his gospel. JDGDunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*.

But we still have Communion, and being post-Enlightenment has not robbed us of the sacrament. What we cannot deny is the connection between Holy Communion and sacrificial blood, even if we do not overtly cherish that connection.

Here an incident comes to mind, involving two prominent ministers, one of the Church of England, the other Church of Scotland and Presbyterian USA. Edward Patey was Dean of Liverpool, and in retirement served as Interim Rector of St James, Madison Avenue, New York near the Presbyterian Church whose minister was David Read, whose childhood home was, if I am not mistaken, near this church. The two churches had a joint Thanksgiving Day service, and in preparation Patey met Read and was shown round the church and halls. When they came to the swimming pool Patey asked Read if he baptised in it, and Read said he didn't. Patey said he thought the sacraments should be messier. When they came to the Thanksgiving Service, a Communion, someone caused a chalice to fall and spill beside the Holy Table. As it was being mopped, David Read turned to Edward Patey and said, quietly, Well, you wanted messy sacraments.

Now not only do I hold to the centrality of the Lords Supper in Christian living and practice. I would go further than that. If the more evangelical keep the cross of Christ at the heart of their faith, then I would regard the Holy Communion, the Mass, as the centre. Both the preaching of the cross and the practice of the Eucharist hold the saving benefit of Christ as the heart of our religion; and one thing the sacrament preserves is that it is a shared practice, not chiefly an individual belief.

That shared practice is deeply important, and I would even go so far as to set it beside personal belief or personal relationship with God as being the other way to practice Christianity- shared activity, daily duty, churchgoing and taking the sacrament together, and I am probably representative of those, maybe the overwhelming majority of the church, for whom faith is more shared practice than personal belief.

So John the Baptist was pointing to some central elements in our Christian religion when he said Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world; and the living out of that perception, while it may matter greatly to the inner souls of some of us, will for all of us flow into common worship, shared sacrament, life together.