

## 20140120EpiphanyII Sermon

I heard that James Alison was going to visit Cape Town in 2014 and so I looked up Girardian memes etc. I came across some good stuff by Rev. Tom and Rev. Laura Truby, Gil Baillie and Paul Neuchterlein and so have incorporated much into my sermon

It continues to amaze me how a little word or phrase in a passage of scripture that I've never really seen before suddenly has significant meaning. Take today's Gospel. It is the day after John the Baptist baptised Jesus and the spirit came upon Jesus. Now John sees Jesus coming toward him. It is the word "toward" that suddenly caught my attention. Jesus is not moving away, he is coming towards. John the Baptist cannot repress an exclamation. It is an exclamation brim-full of meaning and depth which needs to be explored. "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" This is not some poetic rhetoric or liturgical memory; after all at every Eucharist we repeat this phrase in a slightly different format. No, this was a deep insightful statement of truth.

You see, lambs were sacrificial animals for Jewish people. If you were Jewish, when you went to the temple to confess your sin, you brought a lamb that the priest slaughtered and the blood was then sprinkled on the altar. The thinking was that somehow God wanted the shedding of blood as payment for your misdeeds, and it was much better that it be the lamb's blood than your own. As someone rather irreverently put it, 'It was like paying your traffic fine in court and the coinage used was blood.'

But is this what John meant by 'the Lamb of God'? Did John mean that God has given humanity a lamb in the form of his own son so that God can then sacrifice Jesus, killing Jesus instead of us? I'm afraid to say that even today many Christians think this way. That popular Contemporary Christian song: *In Christ alone* has in its second verse. *Till on that cross as Jesus died/The wrath of God was satisfied.* This way of looking at it is called "the sacrificial reading" of John's Gospels.

In some of the commentaries I read about this passage it says that many Jewish people have pointed out that this understanding of "the lamb of God" is direct opposite the story of Abraham and Isaac. There Abraham is about to sacrifice his son when God says "no, stop" and provides Abraham with a lamb instead. But here it would appear with that God saves the lamb and instead kills his own son! This makes God a murderer and certainly not the sort of God I would wish to follow. Do you feel as shocked by this as I do? Surely there is another way of understanding this.

There is and it is called the "non-sacrificial reading" of John's Gospel. Jesus, "the Lamb of God", comes from the Father and because us humans do not know the Father, and are in rebellion against God, **we** kill Jesus, "The Lamb of God." We sacrifice him to our violence. It is **our** violence that drives the killing, not God's violence or wrath.

This year 2014 is the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of World War One where 10 million people died. These 10 million were not struck down by God. Us human's did it. When Jesus appeared before Pilot, who shouted, "crucify him;" who demanded that Jesus die? The crowd did. Jesus became like a lamb to the slaughter. 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' John the Baptist's declaration was powerful - even unthinkable! You see, it was no longer our lambs being sacrificed to God; it was the true God changing history, turning everything upside down forever. In Jesus Christ it is all reversed - God sacrificed his lamb to us. Through Jesus, God reveals that we are the wrathful ones lashing out with deadly consequences. Unlike in Jesus' day when all world religions sacrificed animals to their gods and goddess, that has all changed today. Most religions no longer practice ritualised blood sacrifice, but don't us humans still commit blood sacrifice? People and nations claim to know exactly who God wants killed, and we are just the ones to carry it out. We'll hang that criminal, burn that witch, go to war against god's enemies. We make it our duty to exact the punishment against the enemies of our wrathful god.

The "Lamb of God" appears on earth as one of us and we kill him. This "Lamb of God" is not the sacrifice we bring to God but the sacrifice God brings to us! Everything is turned on its head. Through the "Lamb of God," God sacrifices himself to our violence. Do you see the difference?

As John the Baptist observed, Jesus is moving toward us in ways bigger than we can fully understand. All the offering is coming from God's side. We are the recipients of God's benevolent action, the beneficiaries, the undeserving sons and daughters. Like Andrew and Simon Peter, our only response must be to give ourselves over to this forgiving Lamb and choose to utterly and relentlessly follow Him.

We have all heard about scapegoats. In its literal sense it is very Old Testament but possibly this "Lamb of God" can be seen as the New Testament way of talking about the scapegoat, but with a couple of added nuances.

We all know the story of Billy-goat Gruff. How would you describe a Billy-goat? Smelly, belligerent, and somewhat worthless except for breeding? Billy goats don't give milk, they don't give birth, and their meat is tough; in other words, they are the sort of creature you'd be happy to kick out – a scapegoat to take our sin upon him and to drift off into the wilderness. So why does John the Baptist call Jesus, the "Billy Goat of God" who takes away the sins of the world? It just doesn't work, does it. It is not the same.

"Lamb of God" brings out the innocence, vulnerability and value of the One sacrificed to **our** violence. He didn't deserve it. He was innocent in every way. Had he deserved it, even in the smallest way, our killing him could be justified and we wouldn't have to face the truth about ourselves.

"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Every Sunday we say 'Jesus, bearer of our **sins**: have mercy upon me' or 'Lamb of God you take away the **sin** of the world' Well, which is it? Does Jesus bear our **sins** or take away our **sin**? Singular or plural? Most of us can name our SINS. But what if the sin of the world means all that whirls about in our lives – our envy, rivalry, jealousy, pettiness, covetousness, greed and hatred? What if the sin of the world is the entanglements we find ourselves being sucked into unavoidably but which we ourselves have inevitably set up?

What do I mean by that? Well, how often haven't you felt irritated by your sister or brother telling you how well their children have done and you immediately compare them to your own and you start to compete, trying to outdo one other – sucked into a vortex of competition, rivalry, jealousy. Oh yes, you hate to do that, but you do do it and it corrodes your relationship. It is a vortex that you cannot seem to avoid, like water swirling into the drain. It almost always sucks you in and pulls you down so that you feel worse after the conversation rather than better and filled with brotherly or sisterly love. That is one example I'm sure you each can identify your vortex. I'm afraid to say that this is the stuff of everyday life. This is what creates the world we live in, a world where we can kill 10 million people in a World War.

This swirling downward action has been described as sin. All the little sins we commit are the things swirling into the vortex. But the swirling vortex itself is the sin of the world that Jesus came to take away.

What does the God, who is trying to call us out of all this, do? God comes to meet us, comes towards us as John says. God meets us at the centre of that vortex, and says to the evil powers, "O.K., try it one more time." And so we do. We try it on "the Lamb of God", the innocent one, who has become one of us and entered our world to live and show us the way of God. We do to him what we do to each other and ourselves, all the time. And as we are doing it, he pronounces God's forgiveness, saying we don't know what we are doing.

This is how God enters our vortex and simultaneously reveals it and shows us the way out of it! To make our escape, all we have to do is respond to Jesus who is coming toward us by believing Him and choosing to follow "the Lamb of God" who takes away the sin of the world." This is what Sylvia, who is going to be baptised this morning will be doing.