

Having celebrated the nativity of Jesus only three short weeks ago. In many respects we celebrate it again this evening with our reading from John. For in the Gospel of John, like that of Mark, there is no Christmas story – no star, no stable, no ox, no ass, no shepherds, no wisemen, no infant Jesus. All these belong to Matthew and Luke. John's Gospel begins with its well-known prologue: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* After these 5 verses, verse 6 is an interlude about John the Baptist emphasizing that he was sent by God to foretell the coming of the light. Then we are back to speaking of the one who is to come. The final paragraph of the prologue begins with *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth....The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* So really John's prologue is not so much a nativity as it is the description of the incarnation, the divine word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The prologue is followed by ten verses about John the Baptist when he is examined by delegates from the priests and scribes as to who and what he is, a prophet, Elijah, the Messiah. John's reply: *I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord".*

Our reading then begins. The Baptist sees Jesus coming and says something that has become part of our liturgy at most services of communion. *Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!* Some of us might know it better as *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi.* John's is the only Gospel in which Jesus is referred to as the Lamb of God. Although there are many allusions in the Christian scriptures to Jesus as a sacrificial lamb. What does it mean? And what does taking away the sins of the world mean? Perhaps the next most important line from John in our reading are verses 32 and 33: *"I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'* So John's vision of the Holy Spirit descending and more importantly remaining is the sign of the incarnation. The Holy Spirit is now incarnate in the Logos the word that has become flesh amongst us.

Throughout Hebrew Scripture the lamb is frequently a symbol of purity and peace. Perhaps the most obvious example is in Isaiah 11: *The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them.* The lamb is clearly a symbol of purity, peace, and deliverance. The lamb was also the animal used most frequently in sacrifices in the Temple. Hence the association with taking away sins. Part of acts of repentance in the Temple was sacrificing an animal to "atone" for one's sins. But the connection between Jesus and the Lamb is also rooted in Exodus 12 when the Hebrews are experiencing great

persecutions in Egypt. God instructs them through Moses to procure a lamb: *Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it...I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.* This is, of course, the basis of the Festival of the Passover, but the association of the blood of the lamb with deliverance is attached to Jesus because he will take away our sins.

So I trust you understand the association of the Christ with the lamb but what does it mean “he takes away the sin of the world”? Firstly let us consider what is sin. For many centuries we have been too preoccupied with a catalogue of individual actions or failures to act. But sin is not an action or inaction it is a state – a state of alienation from God and neighbour. It is a state of not living up to the Shema thou shall love God and your neighbour as yourself, the first and second great commandments. Actions and inactions are only problematic if they contribute to alienation. It is a state of sin from which we need release. Jesus came into the world to show us a way to overcome alienation and to establish a path back for us whenever we fall back into alienation. It is in that sense that Jesus takes away the sins of the world. We can say with full conviction, Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world have mercy upon us and grant us peace.

Let me remind you of the poisonous doctrine of substitutionary atonement; Jesus died for our sins because only he was good enough to atone for our sins with God so that we weren’t destined for hell. The doctrine was only promulgated by an 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury, St. Anselm. The church existed for more than a thousand years without it. The Orthodox Church throughout the world never adopted it. The very idea that God would require the blood of his son in order that humanity might be spared is perverse. It is a product of a brutal feudal world in which everyone’s existence required placating the person who was above you in a hierarchy in order to simply live. The Lamb of God takes away alienation and creates a path for restoration whenever we fall, no matter how often. And as I have said before in homilies at this service, God does not punish us for sin. We punish ourselves. Later in John, Jesus says *I am the way, and the truth, and the life.* The more we can follow Jesus, the less we will find ourselves in a state of sin, that is alienation from God which also leads us to alienation from neighbour.

The worst alienation has been the church supported distortion of the way the truth, and the life over two thousand years to support elites, the powerful, and even most perversely the rich. The conflation of Godliness and conformity to corrupt social orders has led in our own time to legions,

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understandably, giving up on the church. We are a remnant. Even as we personally continue the struggle to follow Jesus, let us support each other in that struggle. If enough of us engage across the world, the church will be restored and truly be the body of Christ. Amen