

'Behold the Lamb of God'

Bishop of Ebbsfleet's sermon at the Glastonbury Pilgrimage Eucharist

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In the period between the Old Testament and New Testament worlds—the period in which Jesus lived—there was a widespread sense that God had become *inaccessible*, that he'd *withdrawn*; he'd somehow stopped communicating. There might be the odd hint, but essentially the people of God were without the *sense* of God and *access* to God. And if there was no *access* to God and to the assembly of those who praised and worshipped God, then there was no way for sinners to be sure they were at *peace* with God.

Various groups among the Jewish people coped with this loss of confidence in different ways. Most people we can assume just carried on relying on the sacrificial system of the Jerusalem Temple despite the fact that many thought of it as corrupt, compromised, abandoned by God. If you were an *optimist*, say a Pharisee, you hoped that a life lived obedient to the law could be enough of an acceptable sacrifice to God that you could have real if silent contact with God. If you were a bit of a *pessimist*, and you'd given up on the institutions of Jewish life, (you were perhaps part of the Qumran community of Dead Sea scrolls fame), then you were actively waiting for a divine initiative, an anointed priest-king who would restore everything and renew what the Temple was really there for. You can see just these tensions and more arise in encounters with Jesus himself.

However, in glaring contrast, Jesus's first followers quickly became convinced that they *did* have access to God: they *were* able to be part of the assembly of those in God's presence. Astonishingly, not even the betrayals of his trial and death had alienated them from Jesus. Their experience was that God had provided in Jesus—that is, by the shedding of his blood on the cross—what the writer to the Hebrews called a 'new and living way', which restored access to God irreversibly. When they met around the Lord's Table (to fulfil Jesus's commands) *that* was precisely what the early Christians celebrated. Peace between God and God's world had been restored; the betrayals and chaos of sin had been dealt with, permanently, by a gift which God had provided: Jesus Christ.

Now, for any Jew of Jesus's day the story that captures all of that is (of course) Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah. God demands something of Abraham, which he cannot give; a young ram caught in the thicket is offered in the place of Isaac; Abraham's child lives, and therefore God's people have a future. It's a story that triggers all kinds of connections in Jewish and Christian thinking, holding together the idea of *God* providing a gift for us to offer him, and the idea of a

community (ie, the descendants of Abraham) to worship God and to be in love and intimacy with God. *The point was, God had provided a gift to be given back to him that in turn made possible a future for God's people.*

So, when John the Baptist saw Jesus and shouted, "Look! *There's* God's lamb, who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1.29) the Baptist's audience couldn't have failed to make the connection with Abraham's words (Gen 22) "God will provide a lamb for sacrifice my son". Of all the associations in the OT, it was the thought of the male lamb caught in the thicket, and all that it stood for, that John was picking up when he saw Jesus and understood that he was the offering that God was providing so that humanity had a pure gift to offer, a gift that would ensure the future relationship between God and his people. Jesus would be the sacrifice that would take away the whole world's sin, so that God and God's creatures will have a future together. "Mark my words! There is the lamb God has provided." the Baptist says, "He's the one whose death will make peace and open a new future, which nothing can destroy or blot out." He's the one, not me! Don't waste your time on me: follow him, understand him. I must decrease. God has provided.

Now, in the New Testament, sooner or later, talk about lambs becomes talk about the Passover, and that means the blood that keeps death away. The same lamb was also the shared Passover *meal* of God's people as they journeyed toward the cloud and fireworks of God's presence on Mount Sinai. And no reader will miss the way in which John insistently presses the Passover and the Passion together, even making an explicit allusion to the slaying of the Passover lambs, at the time of the crucifixion. Elsewhere in the NT (and especially in the First Letter of Peter) you'll find the same reference, and there is also the reference to the *predestined* lamb that appears in the Revelation of John the Seer. So, whether John the Baptist made these remarks himself on some identifiable date around 27AD or not the early disciples are pulling together all sorts of levels and angles of imagery around Jesus, which helps us to see and understand how *Jesus* opens up a new and living way to trust and intimacy with God. Here is the offering that makes and holds open a future for the people of God; here is an offering that keeps death away, and establishes peace with God; here is an offering to God which in turn becomes our common meal.

For all these reasons, at the very moment when the consecrated gifts are held up before Holy Communion, the Church universal (East and West) has for centuries used the words of John the Baptist: "Behold!" not just look, but *understand*. Jesus is God's lamb, God's gift for sacrifice, the gift that God accepts, that covers the sin of the world, that renews trust and intimacy, that opens 'the new and living' future for God's people.

To end, perhaps it's worth at this moment underlining one further consequence of all this.

We're at a critical moment for our church; the future is by no means settled or certain; we may be tempted to doubt our access to God, to the resources of his grace and light and peace, resources that we need for our future service and discipleship. Into that sense of concern or even mistrust which all too easily shows itself in the church, let us remind ourselves of Abraham's words to Isaac as several older translations of the Bible put it: 'God will provide *himself* a lamb for sacrifice'. The point is, God *himself* is the giver; God *himself* is the gift; God *himself* receives the sacrifice that makes our peace with him. It is all given; what God has done *cannot be undone* because the death and rising of Jesus Christ was his eternal, irreversible, indestructible will and act. The new and living way *cannot* now be closed. So we must lift our eyes for a moment, up from the ground, and let the Baptist say to us as he said to his own disciples: See and know, look and understand, Jesus is God's lamb who takes away all sin and gives us our future in God. To the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.