



KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

called to be a community following Jesus

10am – Sunday 19 January 2020

Epiphany 2

Lamb of God

Pre service music

Call to worship

Kia noho a Ihowa ki a koutou. The Lord be with you.

Ma Ihowa koe e manaaki. The Lord bless you.

Whakarongo mai. Listen up.

We are listening.

The Lord God has called a servant
who will glorify God by bringing people together.

Titiro mai. Watch carefully.

We are watching.

He will be a light to the nations
so that God's salvation will reach to the ends of the earth.

Korero mai. Lift up your voices.

We lift them up.

Let us praise the God who speaks and acts among us.

Hymn

1 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
awake and hearken for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings.

2 Then cleansed be every heart from sin;
make straight the way for God within;
prepare we in our hearts a home,
where such a mighty Guest may come.

3 Stretch out your hand, to heal our sore,
and make us rise to fall no more;
once more upon your people shine,
and fill the world with love divine.

(Winchester New) CH4 334 - Charles Coffin, trans: John Chandler

4 All praise to you, eternal Son,
whose advent has our freedom won,
whom with the Father we adore,
and Holy Spirit, evermore.

Prayer of approach *The prayer will conclude with a sung refrain. Please remain seated.*

O God, you are the source of life, the life-blood in our veins, the breath of life in our lungs.
In you we live and move and have our being. Our life is a gift, an outpouring of your love.
Praise to you.

In Jesus Christ, your Son, we learn what it means to truly live:
To live in love. To live for others and for our world as he lives for us.
In him, there is not just life as we know it,
Limited by sickness, marred by evil, cast in the shadow of death.
In him, there is life in abundance, overflowing life, life uncontained.

So much did he live in love that, like a lamb to the slaughter,
he walked the way of suffering, was judged by those in power,
Was subjected to violence and hatred, and was condemned to die:
 to share our fate in order that it will be our fate no more.
He is the one who is judged, who offers his confession in silence.
And so with him we bring our confession in silence.
The silence of the voiceless and overlooked...
 The silence of those condemned and judged...
 The silence of the outsider and the loner...
 The silence of Jesus judged before the powers of the world...

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world.

**Lamb of God,
you take away
the sin of the world,
have mercy on us**

x3

...grant us your peace. *(last time)*

Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.
For in him, the life of God has been poured out for all.
Sin and death has been defeated.
The one who was slain has been raised. The time is coming
When every creature in heaven and on earth will sing:
*Blessing, honour, glory and might to the lamb of God and to the one seated on the throne,
Forever and ever. Amen.*

E te whanau, in Christ we are forgiven. **Thanks be to God.**

Passing of the peace

Kia tau tonu te rangimarie o te Ariki ki a koutou. The peace of Christ be with you.
And also with you.

(Angus Dei) CH4 778

First Reading: Isaiah 49:1-7

Grace Togneri

49 Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The LORD called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
3 And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
4 But I said, "I have laboured in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the LORD,
and my reward with my God."
5 And now the LORD says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honoured in the sight of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—
6 he says,
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."
7 Thus says the LORD,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers,
"Kings shall see and stand up,
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Gospel: John 1:29-42

Grace Togneri

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' 31 I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." 32 And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 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.' 34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." 35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" 37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they

followed Jesus. 38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” 39 He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. 40 One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. 41 He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). 42 He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

Sermon ‘Lamb of God’

I.

There are many images used in the Bible to describe Jesus and what he came to do. As the New Testament authors tried to make sense of the indescribable, the utterly new, events of Jesus’ life they used all sorts of metaphors and images. Many of them were taken and adapted from the Old Testament as they took language that their community understood and breathed new life into it.

There are certain biblical images, certain passages, today that get used heavily. They capture our imagination. They speak to our souls. Nourish our faith.

There are other images and passages that do the opposite. Passages we prefer to overlook because they make us uneasy. Images that have misused or abused to justify bad behaviour from Christians. Images that jarr with our modern sensibilities.

Perhaps one of those images is the central image of our reading today. Jesus is described by John the Baptist as the Lamb of God. Taken from the Old Testament, John refers to the sacrificial lamb who was slain. It is a violent image that brings to mind the spilling of blood. This image has often been interpreted to suggest that Jesus was slain to appease an angry God, who is waiting up in heaven to smite us down for all the bad stuff we’ve done. But fortunately, Jesus came in and saved the day, paying the ransom, appeasing God. It is an image that not only assumes an angry God but also places the emphasis on our sin.

Is this really an image we want in our canon of imagery? Is this really an appropriate way to understand God today? Can’t we just pass-over (pun intended) this Lamb of God image?

And yet here it stands in the very first chapter of John’s Gospel: *Behold! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*

It seems a dangerous precedent, though, to pick and choose passages from the Bible that we like. That is done time and again to justify abhorrent behaviour in the name of God. And in my experience it’s often the difficult passages that are worth grappling with -- partly for what they tell us about God, but partly for what they tell us about ourselves and our own prejudices. If we only read the passages we like, we end up with a god created in our own image.

II.

So let’s explore this image a little further. Rene Girard was a social anthropologist, who talked about the culture of sacrifice in ancient civilisations. He believed that the development of sacrifice was a vital practice in the development of human civilisation. It enabled ancient societies to make sense of and deal with a violent world. Most ancient religions believed that the world was essentially a violent place.

It was born out of violence and struggle. And so you can read many mythological creation stories tell about how the world was created out of a struggle between the gods. The gods were like human beings writ large. Like us they were angry and unpredictable. They could also be appeased. If a flood hit ... the gods must be angry. Let's make a sacrifice to appease the gods and makes things right. It was the "economy" of the ancient world. We'll do this, if you do this.

But this economy didn't just work in the vertical sense between the gods and human beings. Rene Girard argued it also served an important social function. It's not just the universe that's violent. We human beings can be pretty violent as well. And so it was a groundbreaking moment in human evolution when we worked out that if we placed all the violence, all the bad stuff, onto an individual, it would create a sense of unity, of solidarity in the community. The sacrifice was a scapegoat, the object of our violent inclinations. And so sacrifice became a unifying practice which enabled people to work together for their mutual benefit.

Today we may not slaughter lambs on an altar, but I'm not sure we're necessarily more "civilised" today. The practice of scapegoating is still deeply embedded in our society. We see it today in the rise of populism and nationalism. We see it in our own country. We find a people group or individuals who are to blame for our problems. Whether it's immigrants, Muslims, Jews, the LGBTQI+ community... both the political left and the political right do it. We live in a graceless society in which trial by media is commonplace, in which we tear people to shreds in the public eye, in which we cry for heads to roll and feel good doing it too ... because at least we're not as bad as them...

And into this context, John the Baptist proclaims of Jesus: *Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*

III.

As I said before, John drew on imagery from the Old Testament and I think that's the key to understanding John properly. In some ways the religion of the ancient people of Israel was like any other near-eastern religion at the time. But over the course of the Old Testament, you see a remarkable development that gradually takes place and sets it apart from all the other religions around it. The development was this:

The sacrifice became less about the slaughter, less about the spilling of blood and the killing of the victim... and more about the offering of life. In the act of worship in the temple, God offered God's life to the people, God drew near, dwelt among the people, became once more the God of Israel.

And in response the people offered their life up to God and committed to the way of life, God's way in the world. They became once more the people of God, God's covenant people. In the priestly sacrifice, the priest represented God to the people and represented the people to God, creating reconciled community and peace.

Eventually the tradition broadens even more. The Psalm for this week, Psalm 40, contains a verse that says: *sacrifice and offering you do not desire.* Instead, we are to make an offering of praise and devotion. The offering of our lives to God's way of peace and love. In our passage from Isaiah today, the vision is cast broader than Israel. The self-offering of God's life will be "a light to all nations so that God's salvation will reach to the ends of the earth.

Now that's a remarkable development. In the dog-eat-dog world of the ancient near-east, that development is almost incomprehensible.

And now in our reading from John's Gospel locates all of this in the person of Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John is saying that Jesus is the final sacrifice, the one who fundamentally disrupts the violent cycle of our world, the economy of violence, and begins a new way: the way of peace and love.

IV.

Let me bring this together with a final comparison. In Western Christianity, we have tended to place the image of the Lamb of God alongside the death of Christ, his crucifixion. He is the Lamb who was slain. The one whose blood was spilt for the forgiveness of sins. And certainly this is part of the imagery that we find in the Bible. Take Holy Communion for example. In the West, the church has focussed on the sacrifice. So Roman Catholics call the communion table the altar. Here we symbolically re-enact the sacrifice of Christ.

But John doesn't place the "Lamb of God" image alongside Jesus's *death*. Instead he puts it in the very first chapter at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the calling of his first disciples. Jesus, we're told in our passage today, will baptise us into the *life* of the Holy Spirit.

In Eastern Christianity, the focus has been less on Christ's sacrificial death and more on the offering of his life and our sharing in his life by the Spirit. And so, in the meal of Holy Communion, God offers God's life to us in Jesus Christ. And with Christ we offer up our life in response. Christ lifts us up into new community with God and with one another. You may notice when we celebrate Communion that Kerry lifts up the chalice as a sign of our being lifted up with Christ into new life with him.

The Lamb of God imagery reminds us that we are not as civilised as we often think we are in the 21st century. We live in a violent world. And we human beings are the cause of no small amount of that violence. We mistreat others. We mistreat the earth beneath us and the animals that live on it. Each of us participates in violence through things we say or do. Even by living in society we participate in oppressive and enslaving systems. The Lamb of God imagery takes this reality seriously. But it also takes seriously that there is one who takes away the sin of the world. We Christians are no better than anyone else and yet we gather stubbornly week by week to join with John the Baptist in witnessing to Christ, saying: *Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Have mercy on us. Grant us peace. Amen.*

Hymn

(St Columba - CH4 598) CH4 659 - Fred Kaan

1 Put peace into each other's hands
and like a treasure hold it;
protect it like a candle flame,
with tenderness enfold it.

2 Put peace into each other's hands
with loving expectation;
be gentle in your words and ways,
in touch with God's creation.

3 Put peace into each other's hands,
like bread we break for sharing;
look people warmly in the eye:
our life is meant for caring.

4 Put Christ into each other's hands,
he is love's deepest measure;
in love make peace, give peace a chance
and share it like a treasure.

Prayers for others

Anglican prayer book

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the
glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.

E tō mātou Matua i te rangi
Kia tapu tōu Ingoa.
Kia tae mai tōu rangatiratanga.
Kia meatia tāu e pai ai
ki runga ki te whenua,
kia rite anō ki tō te rangi.
Hōmai ki a mātou āiane
he taro mā mātou mō tēnei rā.
Murua ō mātou hara,
Me mātou hoki e muru nei
i ō te hunga e hara ana ki a mātou.
Āua hoki mātou e kawea kia whakawaia;
Engari whakaorangia mātou i te kino:
Nōu hoki te rangatiratanga, te kaha,
me te korōria, Āke āke āke. Āmine.

Notices and Offering

*We recognise and bless the gifts brought to the table,
and those which wing their way electronically from our banks to the Church's account.*

Hymn

1 Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in our hearts.

Shine through the darkness.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in your church gathered today.

2 Longing for peace, our world is troubled.

Longing for hope, many despair.

Your word alone has power to save us.

Make us your living voice.

[Refrain]

(Christ be our light) CH4 543 - Bernadette Farrell

3 Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
shared until all are fed.

[Refrain]

4 Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
making your kingdom come.

[Refrain]

Benediction and threefold amen

Kia tau ki a tatou katoa

Te atawhai o tatou Ariki a Ihu Karaiti

Me te aroha o te Atua

Me te whiwhinga tahitanga ki te wairua tapu

Ake ake ake

This morning's service is led by Rev Jordan Redding

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