

“Lamb of God” a sermon preached by Rev Jordan Redding at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 19 January 2020

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.

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