

Jesus the Lamb of God
St John's New Barnet

John 1:29-39
18.01.15 Julian Templeton

If you were to represent your personality as an animal, what animal would you be?

- Perhaps a breed of dog: a loyal golden Labrador, or a snappy Chihuahua
- Perhaps a cat: independently-minded, mainly sedentary, occasionally kittenish, taking a good deal of time to groom yourself
- Perhaps at this time of year you are sleeping so much that a sloth might be rather appropriate!
- Or what about a breed of bird: pigeon, robin, or a swan, on the surface gliding along but under the surface paddling like mad!

I'm going to make a very big assumption here and suggest that not many of us would choose a *lamb* to represent our personality. Why? Well, perhaps because a lamb, being by definition immature, doesn't seem to have a great deal of personality. Lambs drink milk, run and jump around, begin to eat grass. Mind you, the carefree image of lambs is probably attractive but probably does not reflect many of our personalities: more's the pity. But there is another reason for why the lamb may not be our animal of choice, and that is because we are aware of what happens to most lambs; most do not live to maturity because most are slaughtered for meat. The lamb is an animal, in many cultures, that is sacrificed. It gives up its life for others.

When the Church calls Jesus 'the Lamb of God' it is saying something centrally important about Jesus's sacrificing of himself for others. In the Fourth Gospel, the very first time John the Baptist sees Jesus approaching he says: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (1:29). The next time John meets Jesus he repeats the description of Jesus as "Lamb of God." The description of Jesus as Lamb of God was long ago incorporated into the liturgy of the Eastern Church and Western Churches in what is called the *Agnus Dei*, Latin for 'Lamb of God'. Earlier in our service, the reason I included the musical setting of 'Jesus, Lamb of God' from our hymnbook *Rejoice and Sing* was to remind us that the *Agnus Dei* is part of our tradition as well, even if we don't include it very often. There are actually four musical settings of the *Agnus Dei* in *Rejoice and Sing*.

For those who don't attend Christian worship and encounter it in the liturgy, the next most likely place they may encounter the *Agnus Dei* is in a concert-setting. The *Agnus Dei* is an important component of the musical settings of the mass and requiem, which are still regularly heard in choral concerts. However, I can imagine that a non-religious concertgoer who makes the effort to understand what is being sung in the concert performance of a Mass or Requiem may find the claim 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' incomprehensible or fanciful. Who is this Lamb of God? And how could one so designated possibly take away the sins of the world?

To try to understand what the title 'Lamb of God' might mean, and why it is so important, we need to remind ourselves of the act of sacrifice that was and is central to Israelite and Jewish identity. If you consult the book of Exodus, you will read in Chapter 12 of the instructions the Israelites are given

on the night the Lord will Passover, killing all the firstborn of Egypt. They are to take a lamb, slaughter it and smear its blood over the doorposts and lintel of their house, and then the lamb is to be roasted and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They are to eat the lamb in haste with belt fastened, sandals on their feet, and staff in hand, for they will soon be on the move out of Egypt. The Lord will redeem them from slavery.

According to the narrative in Exodus 12, this is what happens: because of the blood of the lamb, the Israelite homes are spared the death of their firstborn but the Egyptian homes are not, and this act of terrible divine judgment is the catalyst for the Israelites being allowed to go free. The Passover Lamb was therefore associated first of all with *deliverance from death*. The annual Passover sacrifice and meal, commemorated to this day by our Jewish neighbours, remembers this act of deliverance.

The claim of John the Baptist about Jesus is, however, very specific, he is the Lamb of God who *takes away the sin of the world*. It seems likely that the Fourth Gospel combines the Passover Lamb imagery with the theology of the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah, the so-called Servant Song in chapters 52-3 has the memorable description of the Lord's servant:

He was maltreated, yet he was submissive and did not open his mouth; like a lamb to the slaughter. (53:7)

He bore the sin of many and interceded for transgressors. (53:12)

In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus is the Passover Lamb of God who delivers people from death by delivering them from sin. The Fourth Gospel, unlike the other three Gospels, records that

Jesus ate his last meal with the disciples on the *night before the Passover*, rather than on the Passover evening itself as in Matthew, Mark and Luke. This means that the Fourth Gospel's chronology has Jesus crucified on the day of preparation for the Passover, at about noon, when the sacrifice of the Passover lambs begins in the temple (19:14). And Jesus dies before sundown on the same day, by which time the sacrifice of the Passover lambs has been completed.

The connection between Christ the Passover Lamb and sacrifice for sin is made by Paul in I Corinthians 5:7: "Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed..." therefore the Christians at Corinth are urged to deal with the sinful behaviour they have been tolerating.

Sin, In John's Gospel, is a problem in one's relationship with God, which by extension affects one's relationships with other people. Sin is the alienation from God that is expressed in a refusal to believe in Jesus, the one whom God has sent. The particular sins that people commit manifest an underlying antipathy toward God and Jesus, so that sin encompasses both unbelief and the actions that proceed from it. The sin of the world is fundamentally the world's alienation from God and the one whom God sent. In John's Gospel, in common with the other three synoptic Gospels, it is the unbelief and sin of the people and the authorities that leads to Jesus's death by crucifixion. Yet the paradox is that Jesus's death is not only the result of human sin; Jesus's death is also God's means for *overcoming sin*.

If sin is the unbelief that separates people from God, then the Lamb of God removes sin by removing unbelief. The death of Christ calls forth human faith in God by conveying *God's love for humankind*. This is stated clearly in perhaps the most well-

known of all the verses in the New Testament: John 3:16 “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” In John’s gospel the ‘world’ or *cosmos* is not neutral; the world is all persons and powers that are opposed to God and estranged from God. In ‘giving’ his Son to die for the world as an act of love, God takes the initiative to overcome the world’s hostility and bring it back into right relationship with himself. The theological word for this action is ‘atonement’ or ‘at-one-ment’. God’s action in Jesus, the Lamb of God, makes two hitherto estranged parties ‘at one’. It reconciles them. And it does so by overcoming the basic cause of alienation and sin and hostility—our lack of trust and faith in God—by Jesus’s initiative to *trust and have faith in us as an act of love*.

We each know in our everyday relationships how signally important trust is. If we trust someone and they trust us, then misunderstandings and hurt can be repaired. By contrast, if there is no trust, or trust is lost, misunderstandings and consequent hurt are more likely and more damaging. Somehow trust needs to be regained, and often trust can only be regained when there is the willingness first by one party to meet other half way to clarify the misunderstanding and to address the hurt that has been caused. Eventually the relationship can be repaired when forgiveness is sought and granted.

We can only speculate about what motivated the gunmen who killed the Charlie Hebdo journalists in Paris. Many secular commentators have speculated that they were brainwashed by a combination of religious and ideological radicalism. I think it is very likely that the gunmen assumed that the cartoonists and journalists who produced and published depictions of the Prophet Mohammed were blasphemers against Allah and

therefore *could not be forgiven*. This is an example, albeit extreme, of what the inability to forgive can lead to.

Forgiveness at its most basic is the willingness to let go of one’s grievance. It is not necessarily forgetting what has happened, but it is no longer to allow what has happened to in the past dominate one’s present and future. Forgiveness is a letting-go, or, in Christian terms, it is the willingness to die to the hurt, and this is part of process of dying-to-self called *mortification*.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world in that in that he provides the pattern that means that hurt does not escalate into further hurt. Jesus is the Lamb of God—and this is where he is most lamb-like—in that he absorbs the consequence of human sin, taking it upon himself and dying. Yet in his resurrection he reveals himself as the victorious Lamb, triumphant over sin and death, enabling we who trust him to share in his new existence of atonement and reconciliation. Whenever we are willing to say ‘sorry’ for what we have done to someone else, whenever we accept an expression of apology from someone else, we are sharing in God’s *dynamic of forgiveness* that Jesus, the Lamb of God, has established. By the small word ‘sorry’ the heat and the hurt of damage can begin to be repaired and healed. But if ‘sorry’ is not to become devalued, our change of attitude needs also be accompanied by change of action, which is what true *repentance* is. The good news of the gospel is that by the voluntary sacrifice of his life, Jesus has provided a way for us to share in God’s healing dynamic of forgiveness, bringing peace.

Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on us.
Jesus, bearer of our sin, have mercy on us.
Jesus, Redeemer of the world, grant us peace.