

SERMON FOR EPIPHANY 2 | 15.01.2023

Isaiah 49: 1-7; 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9; St John 1: 29-41

In last week's sermon I tried to empathise with those who find 'Churchy' words like Epiphany, Transfiguration and Annunciation rather hard to get their heads round. Those in the know assume that everyone understands what these words mean.

This week I have been reflecting on the fact that this lack goes for many parts of our Sunday morning liturgy too. Our booklets help to keep everyone on board so that we know what comes next: but why do we recite certain phrases week, by week with only a sketchy idea of why they are there? And the one I am thinking of particularly today is what the pews sheet calls the 'Agnus Dei': *Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.*

Why is that said at every Mass? And the answer is that, in just a handful of words, we are expressing so much of what Christians believe about Jesus.

But to access all those truths we need to do quite a lot of unpacking.

And we probably have to look at a few stories from the Bible to set the scene. So let's start with Adam and Eve. As the story goes, having broken the rules and eaten the apple, God punishes both Adam and Eve, first by throwing them out of the perfect Garden in which they had lived so happily, and then by making them suffer – Adam would have to work his socks off in back breaking manual labour for the whole of his life and Eve would have to endure the excruciating pain of childbirth. Adam and Eve sinned, and they got punished by God – in direct proportion to the crime that they had committed.

As time went on, this link began to get less direct. Everyone still sinned of course but by use of religious rituals, perhaps we could 'buy off' the punishment that was due by diverting the punishment onto an animal. If an expensive bull or lamb or, for the poor, a couple of doves, could be offered to God, perhaps he could be persuaded not to dish out awful penalties to the person who made the offering.

And that is why archeologists, digging up the Temple in Jerusalem, have exposed what was, in reality, a slaughter house on an industrial scale. The city roads led to ramps and there the knives were out for the business of providing sufficient animals for all those who wanted to make blood sacrifices to appease an angry God.

The death of the animal was deemed sufficient to wipe out the sins of the donor.

It is hardly any wonder, then, that when John the Baptist, foreseeing what his innocent cousin would have to endure on the Cross, chose to link Jesus with the lambs who, equally innocent, would be killed to take away sin. *Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world... have mercy on us.* Standing on the street corner as Jesus passed, John understood the symbolism and the link.

But was he right to point to Jesus in this way? Because, surely, we are not into Jewish understandings of ‘blood sacrifice’? And as citizens of the 21st century don’t we believe that each person has to take personal responsibility for themselves? My mistake, my need to put things right? We don’t condemn all Russians for what is happening in this terrible war, we blame the individuals at the top, the ones issuing the orders?

And another thing: what lies behind this idea of ‘vicarious suffering’, someone staving off the anger of God for the sake of others who are not being punished? Isn’t there something deeply unsatisfactory in this phrase: *Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world...*

As I sat writing this, I had in front of me a picture of Alireza Akbari, the British/Iranian dual national who has been executed as part of the terrible events in Tehran as the hard-liners try to shore up the Islamic Republic in the face of massive national protests. And what do we hear from so many of the young people in particular who are risking their lives? That the driving force for what they are doing so bravely is the conviction that only if they are prepared to give up everything – even their lives – will change happen and freedom and justice emerge once more.

And it is true isn’t it? Only total commitment, untainted integrity and a love for others which is even greater than our concern and love for ourselves – will be enough to overcome the totalitarian regimes in Moscow or in Tehran.

St Paul spent a fair bit of time in his letters spelling this out: that what Jesus did by dying on the Cross was not to change the mind of God so that he would forgive you and me for what we have done wrong. St Paul turns that upside down: he says, because Jesus loved us so much, he willingly gave up his life for us. It was a gift, a present, a sign of his total commitment to our wellbeing.

He knew that nothing we could do for ourselves could release us from the wrong things we had done - so he did it for us. That is what love looks like.

For Alireza Akbari in Iran, for those on the front line in the Ukrainian towns and villages around Soledar and Bakhmut, what they are giving is total gift. Or nearer to home at the more domestic level those who donate blood, livers or kidneys to restore the lives of total strangers, the same is true.

And the word for such things is sacrifice: one person giving up something precious so that someone else might live - someone else might be free.

So when John the Baptist points to Jesus with the words: *There is the Lamb of God*, he is pointing not to the Temple and its dreadful method of placating a God who wants to punish - but to the Cross. Here is Jesus, the one who shows in his body the words recorded in St John 15:13 *There is no greater love than this, that someone should lay down their lives for others.*

The Greek word for this kind of loving is agape. An agape meal is the kind of feast when everyone and anyone is invited to come and eat together, the kind of meal that lies at the heart of this Mass and every opportunity we have to receive Holy Communion. And the reason why we need Holy Communion is because we need to be shown over and again that love isn't what God did for us so much as: love is what God is. He simply can't help himself. He is always loving – whatever else is going on. Here we meet the God of love.

And that is what draws us to Mass; to someone who loves us unconditionally, someone who sets aside all the prickly judgements and criticisms that can so easily come to mind when we are relating to other people. I remember many years ago being introduced to the work of the psychoanalyst Eric Berne who, sometime in the 1950s, devised a theory which he called 'Transactional Analysis'. He identified the three ways we react to other people – as a top-down parent, as an equal adult or in a more infant way, as a child. (Each of us are liable to use one of these three modes when someone is relating to us; try it sometime when you are in a conversation. Which mode are you using!)

But when we know Jesus to be the Lamb of God, when we see in practice what it means to sacrifice all our wants for someone else because they are the priority – all those TA categories go out of the window. Sacrificial loving means all our own demands are scrapped in favour of what the other needs.

And so when we pray Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world – have mercy on us – and finally, grant us peace, what we are asking for is the grace to love as Jesus loves us. No ifs or buts; not some transactional: I will love you but only when you love me. Sacrifice in Jesus' terms is just about giving – giving ‘whatever’. As St John says, there is nothing greater than that.