

“The Lamb of God”

Sunday 20th June 2010

Rev Brian Senior

Readings:

Revelation 5: 6 - 14

Psalm 40: 4 - 8

John 1: 29 - 36

What do you think of when you think of a lamb?

- something small and extraordinarily bouncy, out in the fields at springtime?
- something soft and white and exceptionally sweet?
- a soft toy suitable for a baby?
- something known for not having a great deal of sense, so easily getting lost or getting itself into danger?
- something destined for the Sunday dinner table, with a nice dash of mint sauce?

None of these seem particularly godly images, do they? So why do we call Jesus, 'The Lamb of God?'

I've spent four days this past week away at Ashburnham Place, in Sussex, as part of a team teaching Clergy and Lay Leaders about Church Growth. When I think about how God called me to be involved in this initiative, and how we sometimes struggle to grow here at St Philip's, it all helps to remind me that God must have a highly developed sense of irony!

So, it struck me as I began to prepare this while I was away ... teaching, remember, on a course about Church Growth, how John writes in verses 8 and 9 of Revelation Chapter 5:

“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

This is what the Church is all about ... including the Church Leaders who were on the course with us. Each of them is longing to see people coming to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ ... each of them is struggling to find God's way forward in their own situations ... and many of them are facing all sorts of issues waiting to trip them up on the way ...

... but all of them are committed to the fact that God is calling his Church to bring people of all kinds into his Kingdom ... to become a royal priesthood who will serve God's purpose for the present, and in the fullness of time will reign on the earth.

Jesus Christ came, as the Lamb of God, to make himself a sacrifice for this very reason ... that by his blood he would purchase men (and women and children) for God, from every tribe and language, and people and nation. There is no-one who falls outside God's desire ... he longs for all people everywhere to turn to him and be saved, whatever their race, colour, culture or background ... to know his Son Jesus as Lord and Saviour ... and friend.

The Church of God is meant to be a glorious microcosm of what the new heavens and the new earth will be like, with people of every kind welcomed through our doors and enveloped into the fellowship of God's people. The tragedy is that there are times when the Church can seem more like the other place!

But this is what *our Church* needs to be ... a safe haven for all the people of Sherwood and the surrounding area, where they can come to learn of God and discover for themselves what it means to be loved by God, and welcomed into his presence ... and in some way, however imperfectly, to experience a foretaste of heaven.

God's love is such that no-one is beyond his reach, and our task is to bring all who will receive his invitation to join the party, and to discover for themselves the Father-heart of God. The question we need to ask ourselves is whether those looking in on St Philip's would describe what they see as 'a kingdom and priests to serve our God'.

Would they find a people with a passion to do God's will and to build the kingdom of God on earth? I wonder how willing we really are to grow the Kingdom of God here ... especially when that may mean putting aside our own preferences to meet the needs of new or not-yet-Christians? I wonder how much effort we are ready to put in to drawing others to Christ and helping them to grow in their relationship with him, especially if that means taking a few risks and stepping out into the unknown?

John the Baptist took the risk, humbly pointing people to Jesus as (John 1:27):

"the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

As the last of the prophets pointing forward to Jesus, John was understandably shaped by Old Testament models. When he referred to Jesus as "*The Lamb of God*", he may have had in mind an image of the sacrificial lambs brought to the priests at the tabernacle in the wilderness, and then to the temple in Jerusalem ... a sacrifice to be offered up to God on the altar, for the forgiveness of sins ... but not necessarily!

In some early Jewish writing a different kind of lamb appears ... a warrior lamb who comes in judgement against sinners, more in the line of Matthew 3:12,

where John the Baptist says of the coming Messiah:

"His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Maybe this was the sort of Messiah that John was expecting ... a fearsome and powerful Messiah who would come in judgement and retribution. Perhaps this is why, when later he was put in prison due to Herod's displeasure at his straight talk about the King's morals ... John began to have doubts about Jesus, and sent messengers to ask him (Luke 7:19):

"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Of course it is more than possible that, as with so much of what the earlier prophets said and wrote, John's words have a legitimate double interpretation, when he describes Jesus as '*the Lamb of God*'. One Bible commentator suggests that when John describes Jesus as '*the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world*', he was speaking prophetically, and by the power of the Holy Spirit saying more than he could possibly know.

It seems that John was witnessing to Jesus as both "the apocalyptic lamb who judges unrepentant sinners, and the atoning sacrifice for the sins of those who believe".

In other words, Jesus is, on the one hand, the Warrior Lamb, dispensing judgement and justice on those who refuse to repent and turn their lives around ... and on the other hand, the Sacrificial Lamb, willingly choosing to lay down his life for those who do choose to repent, and become his faithful disciples.

We are in a more privileged position than John, because we have the New Testament to teach us. We know that Jesus is indeed both the sacrificial lamb of our Easter celebrations, and also the glorious and awesome Messiah who at the end of the age will come to judge the living and the dead.

So take a look at the lamb portrayed in Revelation chapter 5 ... remembering that the apocalyptic language of Revelation is full of imagery and metaphor, and is not to be read as what we might call 'future history'. Rather than struggling with an impossible literal interpretation, we are to look for meaning in the images and scenarios which John describes. This is a different John this time, of course, not the Baptist.

John's vision is extraordinary, and not easy to interpret ... that doesn't let us off the hook from seeking to discern what God is saying to us through this vision.

John was looking for something else ... not a lamb!

Look back to the beginning of chapter 5 you will see that John had seen a small scroll in the hand of one who was seated on the throne ... God the Father. It transpired that no-one could be found who was worthy to open the scroll or to look inside it and reveal its contents ... a problem which causes John to weep in sorrow ... tears of deep distress.

The one of the Elders said to John (Revelation 5:5):

"Do not weep! See, the Lion of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the Scroll and its seven seals."

So John was looking for a lion ... a fearsome beast who would inspire awe and godly fear ... but instead he saw a lamb. Not only that, but *"a lamb, looking as if it had been slain."*

So how are we to interpret the revelation of Jesus as *"the lamb of God"*, not only in the words of John the Baptist, but in the incredible images shown to the other John in his vision? In contrast to the fierceness of what we expect to see ... 'the lion of the tribe of Judah' ... the lamb strikes us as a very 'soft' and vulnerable image to represent the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It is unexpected ... even a little shocking ... and I suspect it stopped John in his tracks.

J P Love, a Bible Commentator back in the sixties, wrote this:

"None but an inspired composer of heavenly visions would ever have thought of it. When earth-bound men want symbols of power they conjure up mighty beasts and birds of prey. Russia elevates the bear, Britain the lion, France the tiger, the United States the spread eagle – all of them ravenous. It is only the Kingdom of heaven that would dare to use as its symbol of might, not the lion for which John was looking but the helpless Lamb, and at that, a slain lamb."

But this is not the whole story.

If our image of the lamb is of something soft and fluffy, vulnerable and intellectually challenged ... we need to take note that historically in apocalyptic writings, long before the time of Jesus, a lamb was sometimes used as a symbol of a mighty conqueror.

So take another look at the lamb in John's vision:

[1] He looked as if he had been slain, but he was very much alive.

Surely this points us to Jesus, whom John the Baptist prophetically described as 'the lamb of God', who was indeed slain. His death was a terrible death on a Roman Cross, and the marks of his crucifixion were still very evident on his resurrected body.

Remember how Thomas had said, after the other apostles had seen the Risen Lord:

"Unless I see the nail marks on his hands and put my hand into the wound in his side, I will not believe."

.. and how Jesus has appeared to him and shown him his scars, so that Thomas declared:

"My Lord and my God."

John's vision, then, was of a lamb which had been sacrificed, but whom death could not hold ... an amazing image of the Lord Jesus. The wonderful consequences of his death are still present and active in all their power ... the means by which repentant sinners such as us can find forgiveness and salvation.

[2] He had seven horns!

In the Old Testament, a horn was often used as a symbol of strength ... an idea which frequently shows up in the Psalms, in particular. For instance:

Psalm 132:17: *"I will make a horn grow for David"*

Psalm 75:10: *"I will cut off the horns of all the wicked, but the horns of the righteous shall be lifted up."*

or even Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, in the song we call the Benedictus:

Luke 1:69: *"He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David."*

Add to this that the number seven is often called the perfect number ... the number that often in the Scriptures signifies perfection or completeness ... and we see that the seven horns indicate the perfect power of the lamb. Though he was slain in weakness, he has been resurrected in mighty strength. Forget any soft and fluffy image of the risen Christ which you may have seen in works of art or children's picture Bibles. He is awesome in power as much as he is mighty in love.

[3] He had seven eyes!

We can see why a vision such as this is not to be understood in a literal way. What John saw was impossible. A lamb with seven horns and seven eyes is not a lamb as we would understand it, but a terrible freak of nature.

What we are looking at is a complex image with deep meaning, to give us

some further understanding of the nature of Jesus. Seven eyes? ... and not only that, but:

"seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth."

Surely there is only one Spirit of God? ... the Holy Spirit who fills us and guides us and reveals God's truth to those who believe.

Once again we have the number seven as the number of perfection and completeness. Seven eyes suggest perfect seeing ... because nothing escapes the gaze of the Risen One ... nothing is hidden from him.

Remember what Psalm 139 says about our ever-present God (Psalm 139:7-10):

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."

John's vision presents us with the all-seeing, all-knowing and ever-present Jesus who sends his spirit into all the earth, seeking out the lost and calling sinners home.

[4] He stands in the centre of the throne.

The image is a bit confused here, at least for finite human minds to grasp. The Lamb is standing in the centre of the throne, and he comes and takes the scroll from the right hand of the one who is seated on the throne, who we may take to be the Father. The images seem overplayed, but it doesn't matter. To try and unravel those details is to miss the point.

The lamb is surrounded by the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders ... look back at Chapter 4 later if you want to find out more about them. The lamb is at the centre ... the focus of the worship of heaven, as he will one day be the focus of all the worship on earth.

Remember what Paul writes in Philippians (Philippians 2:9-11):

"Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Jesus the Lamb takes the scroll from the right hand of the Father ... as he willingly received his Father's commission to come among us and live and die for our salvation. Together they agreed the strategy for the saving of mankind ... Christ's death on the cross as our substitute, so that we might be forgiven our sins, saved from eternal death, and given the gift of new life in Jesus.

In John's vision, Jesus' actions evoke a great outpouring of praise and worship in heaven, including the offering of the precious prayers of the saints ... in golden bowls which indicate how precious those prayers are to the heart of God. And so a new song is sung in heaven ... sung by ten thousand times ten thousand in praise of Jesus the Lamb:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!"

... and the song is taken up by every creature in heaven and on earth, singing:

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, forever and ever!"

One day, we will hear the song of the angels and join our voices with theirs ... but for now, we take up the theme as we sing the praises of Jesus, who is for us "The Lamb of God."

Reprise Song: "All Hail the Lamb"