

Second Sunday after Epiphany

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Introduction

The purpose of John's Gospel is to reveal who Jesus is to the reader. In this reading John the Baptist points out Jesus to the crowd saying "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus incarnation reveals who God is and God's purposes for all creation. The Gospel of John is both affirming and challenging. God's character of love is proclaimed, and God's project to turn the world upside down is inaugurated. Jesus has cosmic significance and will take away the sin of the world. The author seeks to be a faithful witness.

Text

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 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." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.*'

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 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?' 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. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed*). 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*).

Comment

What are you looking for? For centuries, every Jew had longed for the coming of the Messiah. They had endured long, tough, depressing years, that would challenge any sense of hope in the future. At times it must have been a struggle to be inspired by the coming Messiah. But they had hung on!

Now John the Baptist bursts onto the scene, looking and living like an Old Testament prophet and preaching that the Messiah is coming very soon, insisting that his hearers prepare and be baptized. And then one day John declares “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” The moment, so long awaited, had come!

John had seen “the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and it remained on him” convincing him that Jesus is the Son of God. The one John had described as the Word, with God from the beginning of creation (ch 1) is now physically present to bring about the salvation of the world.

This is high drama indeed! Next day, two of John’s disciples are standing with him when suddenly John points, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples in their amazement at being in the presence of Jesus find their feet walking in his footsteps – at a distance. Then Jesus turns around and asks, What do you want? “Where are you staying?” the disciples ask. Jesus invites the two disciples to come and see.

John’s Gospel is a work of theological art. He loves developing themes that illuminate interpret and extend the theological truths he is wishing to convey to his readers. Lets look at some examples in this passage

The Passover Lamb of God

“Lamb of God”.

Immediately our thoughts connect us to Jesus sacrificial death. The act of sacrificing animals – and sometimes humans – to pacify impetuous deities in order to win their favour so those making the sacrifice could be assured of victory in battles with our enemies. The sacrificial shedding of blood is as old as religion itself. Animal sacrifice was felt necessary to ensure ‘god was on your side’.

This notion of sacrifice is grounded in violence or the protection from violence. Punishment for misdeeds need to be addressed. It was hoped that through a redemptive violent act of sacrifice, personal loss could be averted. The fact that sacrifice was a common feature in so many ancient religions shows that the practice grew intuitively from the human imagination in response to life threatening circumstance.

The title “Lamb of God” has multiple layers. The Passover is a theme that runs through the whole Gospel of John like an interpretive key. In using this phrase the writer clearly has in mind the ‘Passover Lamb’ – recalling the lamb’s blood daubed on the Israelite doorposts during their slavery in Egypt when all within the houses marked with the lamb’s blood would be saved from the plague.

As part of the Passover festival, the Passover lamb is eaten, just as later in John (6.54) we eat the flesh of Jesus – the Passover Lamb – to have eternal life. Similarly in the chronology of John the death of Jesus takes place on the night when the lambs would be killed for the Passover Festival. So the multiple layers of meaning and cross references begin to emerge.

The sacrifice of the lamb at Passover is not a sin sacrifice, rather a costly sacrifice of a valuable member of one's flock, an indication of complete reliance on God's faithfulness to provide for the future. In using the phrase "Lamb of God" I believe John is not presenting the pacification of an angry deity, through a sin offering, but rather he reveals to us a merciful God offering the gift of salvation to all who trust in God. This is God's gift, for the lamb is not plucked from our flock, but is the Lamb of God.

How far this is from the use of animal and human sacrifice in the hope of pacifying unpredictable impetuous deities. "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

A cosmic event

If the Passover is a backdrop to understanding this passage, we are reminded that this festival commemorates not only a protection from the tenth plague, but also the inauguration of the Exodus – so as the "Lamb of God" is revealed we are watching the commencement of God's act of freeing the created order from slavery to the true fulfilment of God's purposes for God's world. This indeed is a new creative act by God as the Word, indwelt by the Spirit, the person of Jesus takes away the sin of the world.

John's defines the work of the "Lamb of God" is far greater than merely personal salvation for those who repent. It includes dealing with the endemic sin of the world revealed in the destructive effectiveness of social structures and time hardened practices that Walter Wink described as the Domination Systems. Can salvation for individuals ever be separated from the freeing of our social, political and power structures from their sinful striving to dominate others? Surely this inclusive vision, both personal, social and cosmic is included in the exciting declaration that John announces in the words, Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

"Takes way" here, some exegetes say, is better translated as "Lifts Up" in other words in the death of Jesus we see unmasked for all who would see, the true nature of sin and the lie of redemptive violence so widely accepted in our world.

Jesus, Where are you staying?

With this kaleidoscope of hopeful religious themes, aspirations and visions conjured up in the teaching of John the Baptist how could the two disciples who were standing with John, not follow Jesus as he makes his way down the path.

In the response of these two disciples, the writer is hoping his readers too will seek to abide with Jesus, learn to follow him and finally participate in the salvation which is God's gift to all.

Response

What are you looking for?

1. Jesus asks his disciples what are you looking for? This begs the question, is it Jesus we are looking for? Or is it a god made more in our image who will support our causes, justify our prejudices and confirm that we are right.

2. The two disciples simply want to be with Jesus? What would you mean if you responded to Jesus by saying that you wanted to be with him, and he said Come and See. Where would you go and what would you see?

3. As the Jewish people longed for the coming Messiah for centuries, dare we continue to look forward to the salvation of our world given the threat of climate change, the propensity to dominate violently others who oppose us whether in international, communal or personal relationships.

Prayer

Lamb of God,
who takes away the sin of the world,
Have mercy on us.
You have shown us
that self-giving love leads from death to life
May the death-dealing violence of our world
Yield to the power of your vulnerability,
And the whole creation join
In songs of everlasting praise.
Lamb of God
Who takes away the sin of the world
Hear our Prayer

Amen