

## Second Sunday after Epiphany Year A

[RCL] Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

### There Goes a Lamb

Winston Churchill once called his political opponent “a sheep in sheep’s clothing.”

At least for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century popular art, hymnody and poetry tended to portray Jesus as “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” Part of the problem would seem to be that we confuse love with sentimentality. Social media, for all its wonders, seems to have fueled concepts of anger and love, easily protected by a firewall of separation from physical contact. Pictures of cute little kittens fight for screen space with graphic videos of atrocities. “False news” stimulates belief, particularly among those who haven’t received basic training on how truth should be distinguished from falsehood.

So when Jesus walked by and John announced to his followers, ““Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! “, what were they to make of such an improbable claim? If they had the slightest familiarity of their faith and religious tradition, two words stood out. They were “lamb” and “sins.”

The edifice of first century Judaism was based on two traditions. The older, the one that placed the Temple center stage, invoked memories of their father Abraham, as he attempted to offer his wife Sarah’s only son Isaac as a human sacrifice. In the story God’s messenger instructed Abraham to substitute an available animal, a goat, for his son. The story has many nuances, but its most important is the step it makes from barbarism to a more benign concept of substitution. God was going to accept an animal, albeit one in mint condition, as a blood offering by which the person, family, tribe or nation were “atoned”, made one with their Creator. Around this system grew the Tabernacle and then the Temple cult, supervised by an hereditary priesthood descended from Moses’ brother-in-law Aaron.

The second vital part of Jewish religion in the days of Jesus was the synagogue system. The Old Testament tells the story of Israel, torn apart, situated between aggressive world powers, conquered again and again. The conquering powers sought to cower the Jewish people by destroying its visible connection with God. Those Jewish people taken hostage “by the waters of Babylon” not only wept; they gathered together to hear their Scriptures read by authorized teachers. In first century Palestine Temple worship, with its substitutionary sacrifices, situated in Jerusalem, jostled together with synagogue practice, hearing and receiving the Scriptures and applying them to daily life.

Note how today’s Gospel brings together these two practices, not in a theory, but in a Person. Jesus is the sacrificial lamb, “who died that we might be forgiven, who died to make us good.” Jesus is also Rabbi, the authorized teacher, in whom God’s law is renewed and applied to the new citizens in his chosen nation.

If you are up to date with the never-ending church squabbles about how Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross is a substitute for our sins, our family sins, the Church's sins and that "of the whole" world, the important point is that God knows how this is true.

Our minds are best focused on the Eucharist, rather than on theories of how Atonement works; on a Person rather than a theory.

In the Holy Meal, we re-member. We bring to life in the here and now, the sacrifice, once offered for the sins of the whole world. We eat and drink, ingest, the life of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Before we reach that point in the service, we hear Jesus the Rabbi, the authorized teacher, expounding to us God's law, the words Jews heard at the time of Jesus and the words Christians have heard since the time of Jesus. And we corporately confess our misdeeds, missteps and flirtations with evil.

We do so as God's community of priests, as we stand between God and the human race, the nations, the Church, our families and ourselves.

Sitting in your pew this morning, look up, and with the mind of faith see the Lamb of God, the one you call Rabbi, and in your hearts pray, "Have mercy on us. Grant us peace."

*Written by The Rev. Anthony Clavier. Clavier is Vicar of St. Thomas' Church, Glen Carbon, with St. Bartholomew's, Granite City, IL. He is also co-Editor of The Anglican Digest.*

*Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. © 2017 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.*