

Epiphany 2 Sermon – 18th Jan 2026

Lamb of God

John 1:29-42

I know we've just got Christmas out of the way, but unbelievably Lent is just round the corner. A month today is Ash Wednesday. Which means this year's Lent Course is also coming up fast – this year: the Eucharist, What's it All About? A chance to ask all sorts of questions about what we do here every week. They may be very big questions. *Why* is this what we do, almost every week? Other services are available, why are we always doing communion? And what do we really think is happening here to us, and to that bread and wine? Or they may be very small ones. What's that little red light all about? What's the correct name for that piece of furniture – is it a table, or is it an altar? And, to single one out this morning, why at every eucharist, just before communion do we say or sing three times, 'Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us'. Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, grant us peace?

Well, the Agnus Dei, as that little piece is known – Agnus Dei simply being the Latin for 'Lamb of God' - fairly obviously takes it cue from today's Gospel reading, where John the Baptist hails Jesus as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. And by singing it where we sing it, as Christians have done since the seventh century, just after the eucharistic prayer and before communion, we're saying that what John hailed, who John hailed, is present now. Right here, we're saying, we are faced with the Lamb of God. In some of our services, you'll remember, I hold the bread and wine up and say: Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Blessed are those who are called to his supper. It's the same idea. Who John met there, we meet here.

Well, who exactly are we meeting? What's the meaning of that phrase, Lamb of God?

Well, too much to address in a short sermon. It's the kind of thing you only really understand through worshipping and praying, lots of worshipping and praying. But there are at least two ways to begin thinking about it.

One might sound a bit odd to start with. When we think ‘Lamb’ we tend to think: cuddly, weak, gentle, lovely. Which makes it interesting that it is a John the Baptist saying, since as I’ve often said John is more of the fire and fury tendency, he’s the one who thinks God will turn up and blast the unrighteous. Not much cuddly and gentle about that. But actually, Lamb imagery itself at the time of John and Jesus wasn’t especially cuddly. That’s *our* way of thinking, not theirs. In some parts of the Jewish culture of the time, especially the wilder edges, the John the Baptist edges, the Lamb was a ferocious figure. It was Lamb as Warrior, Lamb as Conqueror of evil. Revelation Chapter 6 talks of people fleeing in terror from the wrath of the Lamb. The wrath of the Lamb. Nothing meek and mild there.

So there’s Lamb as Warrior, as awesome Conqueror. And then, of course, there’s Lamb as sacrifice: the Passover lamb, the lambs sacrificed in the temple day after day after day. The blood sacrifices which would take away the people’s sins. When John calls Jesus Lamb of God, he’s saying that what all these Old Testament sacrifices were pointing to, was happening here. Jesus himself is the one true sacrifice: offered up to the Father, taking away the sins of the world. John’s Gospel majors on this theme: it has Jesus die on the Cross just as the Passover lambs are being slaughtered, and it emphasises that, just like the sacrificial lambs, not one of his bones was broken.

Lamb as Conqueror, Lamb as sacrifice. And actually perhaps the two ways of thinking aren’t that much different from each other. What unites them is this question of how does God deal with evil, with sin, with all the gone-wrongness of the world. Last week, you might recall, I said in John the Baptist’s world view, God would blast it all away, in righteous fury and indignation. Jesus, I said, was different: where John expected fiery justice, Jesus gave gentle mercy. He didn’t burn up the tax collectors, he had supper with them. He nurses, rather than condemns.

And that was true enough, but too simplistic. Because it's not that John the Baptist had just got things wrong. He was *right* that sin needed to be blasted, right that it needed destroyed, burned, that all the rage and justice of God needed to be poured out upon it. Sin truly is terrible. It can't just be indulged, or forgotten. It needs obliteration. So far, so correct for John the Baptist. But what he hadn't quite got yet – and let's face it, it is hard enough to get – is how that obliteration was going to happen. God could blast the wicked ... or, and this is the deep, deep mystery of the New Testament, God could blast Himself. He could choose to take upon Himself what did not belong to Him. He could choose to identify so much, so deeply with sinners that their sin went onto Him. He bore the sin of the world, and what you see on the Cross as he is destroyed, is it being destroyed. Him taking away the sin of the world.

And because He does that with sin, He can then deal with sinners gently. There's no need for fire and fury. It is all spent. There is no condemnation. Your sins are forgiven. You are loved. Your sin died there, on the Cross, in the sacrifice that takes it all away. That's where all the gentleness and mercy and nursing us back to life comes from. That's why sinners get to live. That's why the very worst of us get grace.

When, later in this service, we say or sing Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us, what we're saying is: that sacrifice is here. It's not just something that happened a long time ago, though it did. It is something that can touch us, now. Can draw our sin into itself, and burn it up. Can forgive us. We don't recall the sacrifice, we don't just learn about it as an historical event: we *touch* it, here and now, we share in it. The sacrifice is here. Which is why, incidentally, it's not just a table. It's an altar. It's where sacrifice happens.

And which is also why, incidentally, it's a good idea to kneel, if you can, at the end of the eucharistic prayer, when the bell rings. We don't just change our posture because we're bored standing, or because our legs have got tired. Think who has said He will be present: the Lamb of God, taking away our sin – think of that and, if you can, you should kneel. And if for some reason you can't kneel with your body, and of course not everyone can, you should *definitely* be kneeling in your hearts and minds. Think of it like being before the Cross, because that's actually what it is. When you hear people speak of the real presence of Jesus in the eucharist, that's what is meant. And if it's true, we need to bow down and worship.

This is why we treat the bread and wine we use here as special, as holy. It's not just ordinary bread and wine anymore. It is physically speaking, of course it is. No molecules have been changed. It's still bread, and still wine. But physically speaking is not speaking very much. *This* bread and wine is special. *This* bread and wine has become expressive of the Lamb of God, of the One True Sacrifice. It makes present His Body, His Blood. That's why we don't just throw it away or pour it down the drain: we consume it, or place any remainder in what is called the aumbry – that little safe. We keep it for the communion of the sick, and as a focus for prayer. Which is why the little red light, by the way: to tell you that that the Lamb of God is here, and should be revered.

Revering the bread and wine, however, is not the point. They are holy, yes, they are awesome, yes. But the point is, as the our service says, they are given for you. The sacrifice is not here for you to admire, to look at from a long way off. It's here for you to be joined to. Here for you to put your sins into, and to draw your life from. The Lamb of God comes in the Eucharist so you can eat him and drink him. You place yourself inside Him, inside what He has done, so your sins can be burned up, and his life can live in you. That's why the climax of every Eucharist is not 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' – it's 'the body of Christ, given for you.' 'The blood of Christ, shed for you'. It's you receiving what's been done for you, you joining in the sacrifice. It's communion.

And to take us back to the beginning, this is why we celebrate the eucharist every single Sunday. This is the event around which our whole Christian life revolves, from which everything flows, to which everyone has to return to be renewed and strengthened. This is where the one true sacrifice has gone to work in us. This is where our sins are forgiven, and our new life begun. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Blessed are we who are called to his supper.