

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Sermon for Sunday 19 January 2020
St Matthew's Westminster, 20 Great Peter Street

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Isaiah 49 1-7

1 Corinthians 1: 1-9

John 1: 29 – 42



"Here is the Lamb of God!"

These six words were pivotal to the start of the Ministry of Jesus on the banks of the River Jordan some twenty-one centuries ago.

They bestowed on Our Lord an unforgettable title which has become indelibly woven into the language and liturgy of devotion.

In a few minutes time we will hear them today as the familiar invitation to our Eucharist.

What did they mean to the first Disciples?

What do they mean to us?

Fasten your theological seat belts!

The complexities of Johannine Christology do not produce many humorous witticisms, but one from the 19th century said that the opening chapters of the fourth Gospel are like a pool in which a child may paddle, or an elephant may swim.

If we go down the elephantine route beloved of learned theologians we will soon be getting out of our depths if we analyse the conundrums of Lambology such as:

Was John referring to the Passover Lamb?

Or to the victim lamb portrayed in the prophetic visions of Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Let's forget these arcane academic controversies which have preoccupied many scholars in their ivory towers but produced few answers.

Instead let's take the child-friendly paddling route because this Gospel reading becomes easier to understand if we simply concentrate on the human reactions to the key words in this passage.

In real life, responses to an invitation, a call, a speech or even to a sermon can be just as important as the original words of the message.

The ancient world understood this. The two greatest orators of their age were Cicero and Demosthenes.

The difference between them was that when Cicero finished a speech everyone reacted by applauding and saying:

"How well he spoke!"

When Demosthenes finished his peroration, his hearers rose up shouting:

"Let us march!"

But in today's Gospel reading the first reactions to the words of John the Baptist and then to the words of Jesus were far more profoundly life changing.

These reactions were produced not by oratory, or by argument, or by persuasion but by the loving gentleness of three key phrases:

1. "Here is the Lamb of God"
2. "Who takes away the sin of the world" -from John the Baptist
3. "Come and See" - from Jesus

Two Millenia ago in rural Israel the symbolism of shepherds, sheep and lambs were well understood.

Some of that symbolism came from the Scriptures of the Old Testament such as the 23rd Psalm.

Or the Lamb provided by God to Abraham for sacrifice in place of Isaac in Genesis.

Or the lamb that is led to the slaughter in the suffering servant songs of Isaiah.

But I doubt whether this imagery would have made anything like as much impact as it did on the banks of the river Jordan if John the Baptist had not linked together his first phrase 'the lamb of God' to his second phrase 'who takes away the sin of the world'.

The combination of these two phrases ushered in the revolution of the New Testament.

Now the forgiveness of sin by God was not unknown as a concept for the ancient people of Israel.

Their Old Testament God, Jahweh, could and did take away sin by divine judgement, but often by imposing sentences which required punishment, atonement or even scapegoating while leaving whole generations unforgiven for the sins of their fathers.

What was revolutionary at the start of the New Testament, in John the Baptist's words, was the clear implication that Jesus was willing to sacrifice himself like a lamb in order that everyone's sins could be forgiven.

The magnitude and universality of that generosity seems to have been grasped by two of John's Disciples.

For they immediately left their Master, John himself, and began to follow Jesus.

That surely must have been a huge heart-wrenching decision for them.

Think in our own time of changing from one denomination or church or religion to another. If anyone was thinking of leaving St Matthew's to start worshipping at Holy Trinity Brompton.

Of going over to Rome.

Or even converting to Islam.

That is not the kind of decision to be taken lightly or quickly.

Yet John the Baptist clearly did approve of the immediate and momentous decision taken by his Disciples.

Of course, he was not any sort of competitor with Jesus.

John had been supernaturally guided to be the first recogniser, the proclaimer, the baptizer of the Lamb of God.

Later on in the gospel, John is recorded as saying of Jesus:

"He will become greater. I must become less"

That is an important example of humility for all of us who seek to follow Jesus.

We have to lessen our egos and diminish our personal priorities in order to give the greater commitment in our lives to Him.

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Returning to the scene described in our reading,

It was not just those two disciples of John whose lives were changed by the events described in today's Gospel.

The baptism of Jesus had just taken place at which the Holy Spirit had descended from heaven like a dove.

And the next day two curious Galilean fishermen who had heard John's words approached this mysterious Jesus figure – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – and asked him the mundane question:

"Where are you staying?"

And Jesus replied, "Come and See?"

Come and See what?

We can be sure that this was not a superficial invitation to the fishermen to come and take a look at his Air B n B accommodation.

But we should note at this early stage in his ministry Jesus was completely unknown. He had not preached the Sermon on the Mount.

He had not healed anyone who was sick.

He had not fed the five thousand, walked on the water, changed water into wine or carried out any other signs or miracles.

So, "Come and See" was not on the face of it all that exciting an invitation.

Yet, the simple words, "Come and See" must have had their own mystical and powerful attraction.

For Andrew and his brother Simon Peter did come and see. They spent several hours with Jesus.

It seems that his personality embodied what he was soon to proclaim. For they became his first disciples.

When Jesus invites us, will we come? And if so what will we become?

Most of us will come to his altar in a few minutes time in response to the words "Behold the Lamb of God. Many are called to his supper".

That invitation was made in similar gentle, subtle forms by Jesus several times during his ministry, often to sinners and social outcasts no-one else wanted to invite to supper.

My favourite example of Jesus's style of inviting is recorded in an evocative verse from the Book of Revelation illustrated by a wonderful painting.

The painting is by the Victorian artist Holman Hunt. It depicts Jesus knocking on the door of a dilapidated ramshackle old cottage which is covered in thorns and briars.

And the verse from Revelation 3: 13 quotes Jesus saying:

"Behold I stand at the door and knock.

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If anyone hears my voice and opens the door
I will come in and have supper with him, and he with me".

It's a longer variation of "Come and See".

The Holman Hunt painting brilliantly highlights a detail in the portrayal of that rusty ramshackled old door. The detail is that there is no door handle. So, this is a door that cannot be opened from the outside.

It is the artist's reminder that Jesus's invitations can only be accepted if we open the door of our hearts to him.

That is the journey of faith which runs all the way from the banks of the River Jordan 21 centuries ago to the altar of St Matthew's today.

The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and all our most personal and private sins too, is inviting us to Come and See, to Come and have supper with him.

May we like those first disciples, accept his invitation with joyful, grateful hearts. **Amen**