

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time A - Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the World

January 15, 2023.

In this Sunday's Gospel reading (John 1:29-34), John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said, **"Behold the Lamb of God. This is the one who takes away the sins of the world."** The expression John used is so familiar to us that it may have lost its impact. During mass, when the priest is preparing for communion we hear him say, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." What do we mean by this? Throughout human history, from Moses to now, there have been multiple attempts to heal society, to take away the sins of the world.

"Lamb of God" is John the Baptist's favourite title for Jesus. It also became one of John the Evangelist's favourite titles. He used it in his Gospel, and then he used it again, twenty-nine times, in the Book of Revelation. It brings together four images that would have been familiar to the Jews of those times. By calling Jesus the "Lamb of God," St John is telling us that the ancient Jewish images are fulfilled. The first image: At the moment Abraham was offering Issac as the sacrificial lamb, God offered a real lamb as the replacement (cf. Genesis 22:11-12). This symbolized forgiveness and mercy of God if we are faithful. The second image: in the Old Covenant, God required the Jews to sacrifice a lamb twice a day to expiate the sins of the people (cf. Exodus 29:39). So the lamb symbolized the price to be paid for sin. The third image: The primary holy day of the Jews was (and remains) the Passover. In the Passover ceremony each family sacrifices and eats a lamb to recall their liberation from Egypt in the days of Moses. On that night, God allowed the death of all the firstborn children and animals of the Egyptians, but spared those of the Hebrews. In order to indicate which households the angel of death was to skip over, God commanded the Hebrews to kill a lamb and mark their doorposts with its blood. Thus the Passover lamb signified God's merciful and saving love. The fourth image: Finally, a lamb going silently and submissively to be slaughtered, describing the coming Messiah. He was going to take Israel's sins upon himself and wipe them away through his suffering obedience. And so, by calling Jesus the "Lamb of God," John reminds us that all of these Old Testament symbols had been pointing towards Christ - the true Saviour.

Sometimes it is good for us to remember the basics of our faith. The human race was created to live in communion with God, in whom alone we find happiness. This is our fundamental purpose in life - it's the reason that nothing else in the world satisfies our deepest desires. Not money, because money runs out. Not pleasure, because pleasure wears off. Not power, because power corrupts. Our hearts were made for more than all those worldly things. They were made to love and be loved with an eternal love, and that can only come from God. But Adam and Eve walked out on God, and the human race became lost and fell under the power of the devil. We couldn't save ourselves, so Jesus came to rescue us. As a true man and true God, he was able to end mankind's rebellion against God and reestablish our communion with God. It is hard to understand, but it's true.

There once was a boy who spent many hours building a model sailboat. When he put it in the local river, however, it moved away from him quickly. He chased it along the bank, but the strong wind and current carried the boat away. The heartbroken boy knew how hard he would have to work to build another sailboat. Downriver, a man found the beautiful boat, took it to town, and sold it to a toy store. Later, the boy was walking through town and noticed the boat in the store window. He explained the situation, but the shopkeeper didn't believe him and said that the only way to get the boat back was to buy it. The boy wanted it back so much that he did exactly that. Then he looked at the boat and said, "Little boat, now you're twice mine: I made you and I bought you." **That's what God did for us - we are twice his. He created us and bought us back when we were lost, but instead of paying cash, he paid with his blood - the blood of the Lamb of God.**

Saint Damien of Molokai was a strong, hard-working, athletic priest who went to minister to a leper colony in Hawaii in the 1800s. The bishop had arranged for priests to take turns on a three-month rotation, but when Father Damien saw the colony's destitution, he decided to stay and work there full time. He built hundreds of small houses to replace the miserable huts the dying lepers were

living in. He laid pipes to bring in fresh water from inland springs. He built coffins and created a cemetery to bury the dead who previously had been piled into shallow, mass graves. He established small farming plots, built clinics and chapels, formed a choir and orchestra, tended the lepers' hideous wounds with his own hands, and brought dignity, order, work, and hope back to the crowds of sick who poured into the colony. For eleven years he worked tirelessly. Then one Sunday morning in June of his twelfth year in Molokai, Fr Damien climbed to the ambo and read the Gospel passage for the day. Then he paused, looked out across his crowded church, which he and his lepers had built, and began his sermon: "We lepers..." he said. The congregation gasped. With those words he had informed them that at last he too had contracted the deadly disease. For four more years he continued labouring on as his body rotted away, until death took him to his reward. Blessed Damien was following the example of his Lord, Jesus Christ, who freely took upon himself the sorrows and suffering that sin had let loose among us. **Only out of love for us, the sinless Son of God offered himself as a victim on the cross for our salvation, thus becoming the sacrificial Lamb of God.**

The recently deceased Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI invited all Catholics to renew this ancient devotion of offering up our sufferings in union with Christ's in his *ENCYCLICAL LETTER SPE SALVI*. Many people in the world don't pray, don't believe, don't confess their sins, are continuing in their rebellion against God... We can be a bridge between them and God by offering up our sufferings through prayer, by being Lambs with the Lamb. **"There used to be a form of devotion... that included the idea of "offering up" the minor daily hardships that continually strike at us like irritating "jabs", thereby giving them a meaning... Those who did so were convinced that they could insert these little annoyances into Christ's great "com-passion" so that they somehow became part of the treasury of compassion so greatly needed by the human race. In this way, even the small inconveniences of daily life could acquire meaning and contribute to the economy of good and of human love. Maybe we should consider whether it might be judicious to revive this practice ourselves."** (*Spe salvi*, 40).

Brothers and sisters, Jesus offered his very self for our redemption. In so doing, he showed us two things. First, he showed beyond any doubt that absolutely nothing we do can ever extinguish his love for us. He died for us while we were yet sinners - and so, we can never doubt his love for us. The Lamb of God loves us just as we are, and will always love us. We must never let anything come between us and Jesus Christ. Whenever we find ourselves doubting his love or goodness, we can be sure that thought is a temptation from the devil - it could never come from God. Second, by giving himself up for our salvation, he showed us the path to happiness. We were created not to indulge ourselves, but to give ourselves - to love in the full, Christian sense of the word, laying down our lives for God and neighbour, just like Christ. Christ conquered sin and evil by loving, by giving himself to others. We conquer sin and evil in the same way - by loving, by giving without counting the cost, by forgiving without conditions. Christ is our King and our Leader. And so, to be his loyal subjects and followers, we too should bravely become Lambs of God - sacrificial offerings on the altar of our own crosses. Like Christ, we have been chosen for a mission in the world of our time. The carrying out of that mission will only be possible if we are prepared to live in accordance with God's will. We are all called to witness to Christ in our living and to make the world a better place by our presence. We reflect the glory of God when we refuse to compromise with evil in any of its forms. This self-sacrificial, self-forgetful love is so central to our faith that the Church reminds us of it in every Mass, when we pray, "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us." And when we receive Holy Communion, we are receiving the Lamb of God, partaking of the saving Lamb, just as the Jews of the Old Covenant partook of the Passover Lamb. And when we receive the Lamb of God with a lively faith, he strengthens us to follow his example. Every day of our lives this fallen world is filled with struggles and hardships, big and little, that can become instruments of salvation. By offering himself on the cross, Jesus reconciled sinners to God. By offering ourselves on our crosses, we can do the same thing. When we offer our daily sufferings to God in prayer, they become channels of grace for the conversion and sanctification of the world. Today, let's pray those words from the very depths of our hearts, appreciating in a fresh way all their beauty and meaning. Today, when we receive the Lamb of God, let's do so from the depths of our hearts, filled with gratitude for his love and with a deep

yearning to love him in return. Let's grow the seed of christian life in us, bearing fruit as we develop a deeper relationship with God. Amen.