

A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran at Whitfords Community Church, 2nd Sunday after Epiphany 2005

(Based on John 1:29-42)

There is the note of sacrifice in John's designation of Jesus as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". John declares this of Jesus twice on successive days. John's disciples must have thought this significant for they end their relationship with him and attach themselves, if at first tentatively, to Jesus.

I wonder in those first heady days of attraction whether Andrew and Simon and the others thought twice about sacrifice. Perhaps they were too caught up in this new relationship to reflect too deeply on the forecast given by John the Baptist -that Jesus was the lamb of God.

This note of sacrifice in the life of Jesus is there from the very start in John's account of Jesus. The designation 'lamb of God' alludes to the sacrificial system at the heart of Judaism and at the very centre of the city of Jerusalem in the Temple. The Baptist is being prophetic in naming Jesus as God's means of taking away the sin of the world. Still as we deal with our own life experiences and the traumas and tragedies of the world we uncover even more of what it means for Jesus to have been the lamb of God and what taking away the sin of the world involved.

The sacrificial systems that were at the centre of Middle Eastern religions are a cultural world away from us. We can be mystified by the ideas that lie behind such cultic acts. The images that are part of such a religious system do not readily make sense to us. A new vocabulary is required from us - words that we do not normally use, at least with the meaning that a sacrificial system demands.

In cultures that were not shielded from blood and guts either in normal market-place commerce or in the almost continuous warfare that long dominated the ancient world, blood and death were every day visible occurrences. The simple equation of blood with life was obvious to all.

The spilling of blood meant death or in religious practices an exchange - one life for another life. This was a preventative action - a liberation for one by the death of another. It was as if the sacrificed gave new life to the sacrificer. This system had its own economy. Always the requirement was the life force to be released so that there would be benefit for another.

Thus within Judaism there was the sacrificial system operating in the Temple. The Temple was a kind of religious abattoir that guaranteed freedom for the devout who offered animals in exchange for redemption, freedom from sin. The sacrificial system made it clear that there was a cost involved in this moral universe -there was no such thing as a free sin. Somehow or other within the giant web of human existence one's person's sin became another person's affliction. This was the nature of the moral interdependence in which we share.

Science has figuratively asserted this global interdependence with its own maxim of a butterfly flapping its wings in Thailand causing havoc in Japan. Economics too asserts that the greed of a first world citizen exploits the life of a third world worker. We are all inter-related in this huge global system and all our actions affect others, even when we think no one else is aware of what we have done. In this sense, the world is not morally neutral. We are all inter-connected and we each affect others for good and for ill.

Given what science and economics now suggest, and given our own small experiences of interdependence, the sacrificial systems of ancient religions do not seem as naive or as crude as we might first have thought them. Sacrifice is the religious notion that deals with the accumulation of our non-moral actions that infect the human system and violate God's created order.

Even sociologists have named a strange process that reverses a series of right discrete decisions. For instance, you go driving north one weekend and discover a secluded beautiful coastal area where you

can build a beach shack. You quickly and eagerly buy that site, build your shack, and begin to enjoy the luxury of coastal beauty free of others. As time goes by, others too become acquainted with this idyllic spot. Soon there are other beach shacks. Then almost overnight there is a village, then a town. And people begin the search for their idyllic tranquillity all over again!

The accumulation of discrete, legitimate decisions (all very proper in themselves) brings about the very opposite result of what each individual decision wanted. This yet again illustrates the systemic nature of our lives, our inter-connectedness, that if ignored can bring real harm to all involved.

This moral system which we so violate needs a circuit-breaker, otherwise the system will suffer from the moral equivalent of a shark feeding frenzy and implode. The accumulation of non-moral actions will gravely impair the equilibrium of a moral universe, and cause chronic disruption.

World Wars are serious instances of this moral imbalance with consequent generational forms of suffering. I think the most graphic instance of such moral turbulence was the trench warfare in Belgium and France in the First World War. That was a slaughterhouse of excruciating suffering that generated a moral morass for decades thereafter and affected the moral tone of the twentieth century.

Sacrifice in the Jewish religious practice was a circuit-breaker that freed people from the accumulated effects of their immoral actions. This was God's new start programme. There was a transference of guilt from human beings to sacrificed animals that broke the accelerating moral dilemmas, offered a new beginning, and raised moral awareness and the cost of human actions.

This all made sense in a subsistence agricultural society with a limited economy. The cost factor (a perfect animal) was sufficiently high to bring order and establish moral sense. But it was culturally limited.

The designation of Jesus as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" is a giant leap forward in religious thinking. For this notion suggests that God becomes directly involved as the circuit-breaker who limits the effects of accumulating human disordering. The previous system of animal sacrifice that culminated in the slaughter of the Passover lambs was a system of moral appeasement. Such sacrifices were thought to appease God's affront from human sin, and at the same time the moral imperatives of relationship with God were heightened in the cost to another, an innocent victim (albeit an animal).

Jesus as the Lamb of God is the clearest statement that God establishes God's own morality by subjecting God's Being to the impact of humankind's generation of sin and moral turbulence. God acts in Jesus as the ultimate circuit-breaker in the cycle of human violence, and suffering. God's action through the Lamb of God (Jesus) absorbs the cloying effect of sin so that within the gigantic continuing human system that goes on morally polluting human life the total effect of that is not catastrophic.

Think of sin as cholesterol clogging and chocking our moral sensibilities (the equivalent of the body's arteries). Humankind could suffer a major disabling moral stroke that would reduce our life greatly and impair us forever, had not God acted to treat our terminal condition by siphoning into Godself the deadly disabling consequences of our sin. God redressed the moral balance of the human system by taking upon Godself the sin of the world. Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

There is another dimension to Jesus being the lamb of God, the innocent victim. This is another layer of morality that is very important in establishing the credibility of God as Father or Friend or Lover, whatever image best speaks into our lives.

The Asian Tsunami dreadfully highlighted the extent of innocent radical suffering in the world, suffering that has existed as long as there has been human history. This innocent radical suffering has required some response from God, given that God is God.

A further understanding of Jesus as the Lamb of God is that God is identifying with such radical, undeserved suffering, by becoming a victim to it too. In the words of Bishop John Taylor, God in Jesus is re-establishing God's trustworthiness by accepting human life at its worst and at its most tortuous. This empathic action recognises the cost to humankind of being the pinnacle in a universe that goes on making itself and in which love is the evolutionary highpoint.¹

Without chance and randomness there cannot be love, for love involves free choice and free will. A universe of chance and randomness (the only known environment for the emergence of love) can erupt in ways that spawn natural disasters.

In order to help humankind believe, God acts in this sacrificial way to win back our trust and to acknowledge through Jesus as the Lamb of God, the cost to us of being in God's universe. And significantly in this double moral act God takes away the sin of the world so that we need not be crushed or debilitated by the massive toxic accumulation of sin.

Discipleship (staying with Jesus as Simon and Andrew stay) is the means of learning not to sin, of becoming God's friend, and of experiencing eternal life now as a preview of its fullness in heaven.

This prompts us to pray:

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, grant us your peace.

¹ See John V. Taylor. 1992. The Christlike God. SCM: London, p. 205.