

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
15th January 2023 - 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings (Year A): 1st: Isaiah 49:3,5-6. 2nd: 1 Corinthians 1:1-3. **Gospel:** John 1:29-34

Every time the Mass is celebrated the words of John the Baptist about Jesus are recalled: ‘Look, there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.’

The biblical writers had no hesitation about mixing their metaphors. Jesus is sometimes the shepherd of the flock and sometimes the lamb. The image of Jesus as lamb grew out of a rich and complex vein of Jewish thought.

The blood of the lamb, sprinkled on the doorposts, was a sign to save the Hebrew people from the destroying angel: that was when Moses led them out of their Egyptian slavery. The annual remembrance of that liberation became the Passover feast, the climax of the Jewish year.

Lambs in great numbers were slaughtered and family groups ate the meat of yearling lamb in the sacred meal which bound them together in very close fellowship with one another and with God. They ate it standing, dressed for a journey.

In the chronology of John’s gospel, the death of Jesus took place at the very time when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered. And the ritual instruction regarding the sacrificial lambs applied also to Jesus: ‘Not one bone of his shall be broken.’ (John 19:36)

The Christian community favoured the symbol of the lamb from the very earliest times. Little more than twenty years after the death of Jesus, a passing reference in the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians suggests that his readers were already familiar with the symbol: ‘Christ, our Passover has been sacrificed.’ (I Cor: 5:7)

Another important idea behind the symbol of the lamb was the practice of sacrificing animals as a substitute for what people owed to God.

Through the sacrifice of an animal thanks were returned to God for the birth of the first born. And it was through sacrifice that expiation was paid on behalf of a sinner. That idea of payment comes through the words of 1 Peter 1:18-19 ‘Remember, the ransom that was paid to free you was not paid in anything corruptible, neither in silver or gold, but in the precious blood of a lamb without spot or stain, namely Christ.’

The choice of our 1st reading from Isaiah 49 invites us to interpret the gospel passage in the light of Isaiah’s picture of Chosen servant of God. Indeed the scholars tell us that the word translated as Lamb of God might equally have been translated as servant of God.

In the light of Isaiah’s Song of the Servant, which we always hear in Holy Week, Jesus is understood as a gentle, innocent lamb who is led to death on behalf of others. ‘Ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried.’ (Is 53:4)

As the sacred host is raised before our eyes we hear to express our faith “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world” Blessed are those called to the Supper of the Lamb.’

We are truly blessed to be invited to his banquet.

In the Eucharist Jesus is the Passover lamb whose flesh is eaten by those who are ready for the journey out of slavery. Jesus is the lamb who substituted for us and in whose blood our baptismal robes are washed clean again. Jesus is the innocent, gentle lamb, on whom the Spirit of power and dove of peace comes to rest.