

Sermon 19'1'20 (2nd Sunday of Epiphany) *John 1: 29-42; 1 Cor 1:1-9; Isa 49: 1-7*

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May I speak in the name of the one true God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen †

Intro

"It's not all about you!"

Have *you* ever found yourself saying that, or maybe just *thinking* it?

I've certainly said it to my 5- and 8-year old grandsons. They're kind-hearted boys – but, like all children of their age, they *can* be startlingly *self-centred* (leaving their stuff all over the stairs, or polishing off a bowl of grapes without stopping to think that anyone else might like some).

In a different context, that *same phrase* came home to me towards the end of my Reader training, 7 years ago. I was anxious about *preaching* to a congregation.

When I *prayed* for guidance (as I *always* do), a *thought* suddenly came into my head: *"It's not all about you!"*. And that made me realise:

- firstly, worrying *unduly* about what people think of us *might* reflect the sin of *pride (!)*;
- secondly, we shouldn't *assume* everything's up to us – God may work *through* us without our being aware of it – and we need to *trust* him.

Part 2

In our gospel reading, John the Baptist is at pains to ensure that people *don't* think that it's 'all about him'.

John (not to be confused with the gospel writer) must have struck people as a strangely compelling, larger than life figure, coming from a distant province (Galilee), looking and sounding like an OT prophet, speaking with such *conviction* and *authority*, calling on them to turn their lives round and live by *God's* values.

His ministry leads him to a remote spot on the east bank of the Jordan - 3 days' journey south of Galilee, and 1 day away from Jerusalem.

There, he attracts a community of followers (some from Galilee). And he's inspired by God to *baptise* them in the river – symbolically washing away their past *sins* and confirming their renewed *commitment* to *God's* values.

After centuries of foreign domination, many Jews are expecting that God will send a 'Messiah' to save their people, *overthrow* injustice, and re-establish God's rule.

So, when news of John reaches the religious leaders in Jerusalem, they send representatives to ask "Who *are* you? Are *you* the Messiah? Why are *you* baptising people?"

Surprisingly, John tells them:

"I'm not the Messiah. It's not all about me - I'm just a voice in the desert calling 'prepare the way for the Master!' - There's someone else coming, whom you don't know although he's standing amongst you. I'm not even worthy to untie his sandals".

Next day, John tells two of his followers:

"The One who sent me to baptise people told me, 'when you see the Spirit coming down like a dove and settling on someone, that's the one who'll baptise people with the Holy Spirit' – and that's just what I saw".

At that point Jesus walks past, and John says:

'Look, that's him - there's 'the Son of God' – God's lamb who takes away the sin of the world".

Part 3

What strange words, let's 'unpack' them.

For *John's followers*, the obvious meaning of '*Son of God*' is that *this* is the long-awaited *Messiah*, come to rescue God's people.

(BUT, having read the beginning of this gospel, we know there's much more to it.)

Secondly: What's this about 'God's lamb'?

Lambs are non-threatening, gentle, lovable. We call little children 'lambs'.

People sometimes made *pets* of lambs, even in OT times (read what the prophet Nathan says to King David about his treatment of Bathsheba and her husband in the 2nd Book of Samuel).

So what does John the Baptist *mean* by this, and what would his *listeners* understand by it?

- That Jesus has come from *God*, AND is especially dear to God? - Yes.

- That Jesus is *gentle*, non-threatening, non-aggressive? - Yes - BUT they assume that God's *Messiah* must embody God's *own* mighty POWER, and will if necessary fight to free his people and re-establish God's *authority*. Hardly a job for a '*lamb*' (!)

HOWEVER, the word 'lamb' has *another* significance for the ancient Jews.

They live close to the land. And, like their pagan neighbours, they still practise the tradition of animal *sacrifice* – offering a dove or a lamb to God to show *thanks* (as Mary and Joseph did after Jesus' birth), or when *asking* God for something – just as we might light a *candle* in church.

BUT there's something *else*: the ancient Jewish tradition of '*sin offerings*', described in the book of Leviticus.

Part 4

If somebody committed a serious *sin* (for example, robbed, or spread lies about someone), provided they were *truly repentant* and publically *confessed*, there was a *ritual* through which their *sin* could be removed and *transferred* onto an unblemished *animal*. This would then be ritually sacrificed and the *sin* itself would be *wiped out*.

Note: this was NOT about *placating* a vengeful God.

The idea of '*sin offerings*' was introduced by God *himself*. It was all about *enabling* the person to *remain* in a '*covenant relationship*' with God (and with the rest of their community), without the sin driving a permanent *wedge* between them.

So, by calling JESUS 'God's lamb who takes away the sin of the world', John's saying that: God *himself* (who desires an intimate, *loving, relationship* with *every* human person) has not only provided a MEANS of dealing with *sin* – with those ways in which we *separate* ourselves from God - BUT so *great* is God's LOVE, that he himself has *provided* the '*sacrifice*' - in fact he's actually made himself the '*sacrifice*'.

What's more: John *doesn't* talk about 'the Lamb who takes away the SINS of the world (plural), but the SIN (a collective noun) – it's about combatting *evil*, everything that *spoils* God's creation and blights the *lives* of human beings (and God's other creatures) – everything that *separates* us from what God has in *mind* for us, his *beloved* children – children who are too ready to act as though 'it's all about ME!' ('me, me, me'!)

Part 5 - Concl

The two disciples John's speaking to go after Jesus and ask him where he's staying. Jesus invites them to 'come and see', and they remain with him the rest of that day. One of them, Andrew goes and fetches his brother Simon, saying 'we've found the Messiah!'.

As soon as Jesus sees Simon he nick-names him '*the Rock*' - that's what 'Peter' means. But as well as suggesting solid dependency, I like to think there's also a touch of affectionate *humour* on Jesus' part, hinting at Peter's tendency to blunder in and think afterwards.

Jesus sees right into the depths of people.

For us, like Andrew and Peter, *following* Jesus isn't just a matter of accepting a set of *beliefs*, but of *sharing* in his *life*, allowing *his* life to *transform* us (and allowing his *Spirit* to work *in* and *through* us).

Jesus, the divine *Word* of God, who chose to *share* our human-ness, *invites* each of us to 'come and see'.

And *what* we see in Jesus' life (and in his death and resurrection) is how God's *glory* is made *perfect* NOT solely in might and power, but in humility and sacrifice – in what *this* world (like the Roman world) regards as *weakness*.

By showing us the humility of *God's* own Son, Jesus teaches us that "it's not all about *ourselves*".

It took his own disciples a long time to grasp that (even at the Last Supper we find them arguing about which of them is the greatest!). But they finally got there after *witnessing* his death and resurrection, AND after receiving the gift of his Spirit.

All of us who read, or listen to, the gospels in the hope of *understanding* more about Jesus, will discover (if we're prepared to open our hearts as well as our minds) that he is simultaneously coming to meet us.

We who profess to be his *followers* must try in our own lives to *live out* what Jesus preaches, and what he *demonstrates* in his life.

But just as it's not it's not '*all ABOUT us*', we mustn't assume that it's all UP to us. He hasn't *abandoned* us to do it by *ourselves*.

And if we pray for *guidance*, and open our hearts to his Spirit, who *knows* how we may find ourselves contributing (along with others) to the *building* of his Kingdom.

Let's *do* it. As supermarket advert says, "every little helps!"

Amen †