

The Lamb of God

6 5 12

Almighty God

who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ

have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life:

grant that, as your grace going before us

you put into our minds good desires,

so by your continual help

we may bring them to good effect

My text is from the gospel according to St John, chapter 1 and verse 29:

'Behold the Lamb of God'.

It is a foolish preacher who asks his congregation what last week's sermon was about. But by now you must know who I am and what I'm like, so let me take a risk and ask those present, who were present last week, what I was preaching on.

As I type this sermon early on the last Monday in April, I can only trust that one brave soul with a good memory will say Psalm 23 or on the idea that as Christians, we are the sheep of God's pasture.

Last Sunday, I used as my text the opening verse of Psalm 23 - **'The Lord is my shepherd'** and starting with the idea that ministers in the Eglise Reformée like Gilbert Beaume are called pastor, we explored what this might mean for us to be

God's sheep. Imagine then the electric shock I got when I came to the words we say each week immediately after I break the priest's wafer in two:

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,
have mercy on us.

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

My surprise, my shock came from the immediate juxtaposition of something I already knew: that Jesus, whom we think of as the **good shepherd**, is also described as the **Lamb of God**. Whoa ! Jesus is both '**Shepherd**' and '**Lamb**' – two very contrasting images to try to suggest, to capture something of the nature and mystery of the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This morning let me take for granted that you understand and can appreciate what the idea of Jesus being a shepherd of his people means. Let me instead just concentrate on the idea of his also being the Lamb of God.

In Judaism, a lamb is associated with Passover, Pesach. Part of God's instruction to his people through Moses was that on the night before the Exodus from their slavery in Egypt, each family was to kill and eat a lamb whose blood should be smeared on the lintel of the place where they were staying so that that night, the

angel of death might pass over them and that their first-born children might be saved from the tenth plague that was about to strike down dead the Egyptian first-born. The killing of a living creature such as a lamb is a notion deeply rooted in the Jewish system of blood sacrifice now long defunct with the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem. The underlying idea was that an innocent, perfect living creature, in this case a spotless lamb, should be killed so that the people might live. To offer up a blood sacrifice is to pay the price for wrong-doing and to make right a relationship with deity.

At present, we live in 21st century France far-removed from such a value system, such a world view that suggests the blood and life of a living creature should be offered up to placate an otherwise angry god. But the world in which Jesus lived and died and rose again had a very different way of making sense of reality. And so just before we receive communion we remember that Jesus is the Lamb of God, something which John the Evangelist understood and at the start of his gospel places in the mouth of John the Baptist. Jesus is the Lamb of God: spotless, sinless, offering himself up as a willing sacrifice to pay the price of our sins in order to restore us to a right relationship with God in a single, all-effective act of self-sacrifice.

Not nice but a wonderful thought: that Jesus the good shepherd also plays the part of the sacrificial lamb to effect our atonement, our at-one-ment with God. This double image of being both shepherd and lamb is a paradox and a mystery and as such a sure sign of deity.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

6th May, 2012

H: Sermon 25: Lamb

