

Homily 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

18th January '26

'Behold the Lamb of God who Takes Away the Sin of The World' (Jn 1:29)

When I was head teacher of St Michael's in Hertfordshire a new boy, with a bit of a reputation of having 'attitude', arrived at the school. He immediately, got into trouble and was assigned to 'litter duty'. He had the fortune or misfortune to be teamed up with me. 'Ok, Joe you are going to pick up litter with me.' I informed him. 'I didn't come to this school to be a servant!', he protested. I said nothing but simply beckoned him to follow me. As I started to pick up the odd plastic bottle and pieces of paper the penny dropped, the headmaster wasn't asking him to pick up litter but was asking for assistance. When I had picked up about 4 or 5 discarded objects Joe bent down and, slightly embarrassed, started helping me. I suppose a good example of, 'If you want to be MASTER you must be SERVANT of all'

In today's First Reading from The Prophet Isaiah, written over 700 years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet refers to Israel as SERVANT three times in as many verses. By inference the long-awaited Messiah too would be not only the anointed priest, king and prophet but a SUFFERING SERVANT. Humility and service of the most vulnerable would be at the heart of the Messiah's mission.

In today's Gospel Jesus is proclaimed by The Baptist as a humble SERVANT. Calling Jesus "the Lamb of God" meant that his death was intentional, not accidental. His Passion and Death fulfilled centuries of Scripture. 'Lamb of God' signified that sacrifice, salvation, and SERVANT kingship all meet in the person of Jesus and God's victory comes through SERVANT suffering love. Lambs were commonly used as sin offerings (Leviticus 4; 16). A sacrificial lamb, innocent and unblemished, symbolised substitution—in other words the lamb's life is sacrificed so others could be forgiven. When John the Baptist says, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29), he is declaring that Jesus is the SUFFERING SERVANT, the ultimate and once-for-all sacrifice, not just for Israel but for the whole world.

Arguably, the most powerful Old Testament image of the sacrificial lamb is The Passover (Exodus 12) when a lamb was killed and its blood protected Israel from judgment and its death marked deliverance from slavery. So, calling Jesus the Lamb of God presents him as: the SUFFERING SERVANT who delivers us from sin and death and whose blood brings salvation and freedom. Calling the Messiah a lamb was shocking. The Jews expected a conquering king, whilst lamb symbolises gentleness, vulnerability, and SERVANT- LIKE obedience, redefining power as self-giving love and SERVICE, not domination.

The headmaster picking up litter was also, no doubt, a shock to young Joe and I am sure that it shifted his understanding of the meaning of leadership in a Catholic School, 'If you want to be headMASTER you must be the head SERVANT of all'. Young Joe turned the corner that day. He settled into his new school, eventually excelling both academically and socially, becoming Deputy Head Boy.

Some Notes on The Scriptural Significance of ‘Lamb of God’

1. Lamb as a Sin Offering

In the Hebrew Scriptures, lambs were commonly used as sin offerings (e.g., Leviticus 4; 16).

- A lamb was innocent and unblemished
- Its death symbolised substitution—one life given so others could be forgiven

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2. The Passover Lamb

Perhaps the most powerful background is Passover (Exodus 12).

- A lamb was killed
- Its blood protected Israel from judgment
- Its death marked deliverance from slavery

By calling Jesus the Lamb of God, the New Testament presents him as:

- The means of deliverance from sin and death
- The one whose blood brings salvation and freedom

This is reinforced by:

- Jesus being crucified at Passover
- “Not one of his bones will be broken” (John 19:36), echoing Passover instructions

3. Isaiah’s Suffering Servant

Isaiah 53 describes a servant who “was led like a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7)

This figure:

- Suffers willingly
- Bears the sins of others
- Brings justification through suffering

Early Christians saw Jesus’ death as the fulfilment of this prophecy, giving theological meaning to his apparent defeat.

4. A radical redefinition of power

Calling the Messiah a lamb was shocking.

- Jews expected a conquering king
- A lamb symbolises gentleness, vulnerability, and obedience

Yet in Revelation, the Lamb is also:

- Slain, yet standing (Revelation 5)
- Worthy to rule and judge

This redefines power as self-giving love, not domination.

5. A universal claim

The phrase “of God” matters too:

- The lamb is provided by God, not humans
- Its effect is cosmic— “the sin of the world,” not just Israel

This makes Jesus central to God’s plan for all humanity.

In short, ‘Lamb of God’ explains who Jesus is, why he died, and what his death accomplishes.