

Downing Place United Reformed Church

Sermon – Sunday 19th January 2020

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Isaiah 49: 1-7; 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9; John 1: 19-42

‘Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ These words have become deeply familiar to us. We use them on many occasions when we celebrate Holy Communion. We hear them, time and time again set to music. They are words that echo, hauntingly, down through the Christian centuries. And so perhaps it comes as a bit of a surprise that the only time we hear them in scripture is in this text from John that we’ve heard read this morning. It is the only time that Jesus is referred to as ‘the lamb of God’, though we do get the idea returning in the book of revelation and the lamb seated upon the throne.

Growing up in Cumbria, the spring lambs were something to look out for. By this point in the year, 30 years ago, the first lambs might be arriving. And there is no doubt about it, they have the ‘Ah’ factor. Their little wobbly legs, that as they gain strength enable them to gambol endearingly. Their sweet little faces and bleats. They are wonderful little creatures, perfect for a picture postcard. Less perfect, I might suggest, as an image to leap to for something that will save the world. If we wanted an animal image for something that we might wish to protect or save us, we might reach for the lion or for the eagle. It is perhaps not an accident that Isaiah reaches for the image of the lion and the lamb, as the most unlikely pairing to lie down together. The lion being the ultimate in strength, the lamb, perhaps, the ultimate in weakness.

And yet here, John the Baptist calls Jesus a ‘lamb’. And the imagery of the lamb carries with it certain profound connotations. For it is through the sacrifice of the Passover lambs that the people Israel were liberated from slavery. Lambs were offered as sacrifice in the Temple. Lambs could be pure offerings sacrificed to bring about the liberation of people. And John calls Jesus, ‘a lamb’. When we stop and consider it, it seems strange that the son of God, Almighty God, who created the heavens and the earth, should be likened to a ‘lamb’. It seems strange that the Messiah, the anointed one of God, the one the people expected to liberate Israel from its oppressors – the Romans – should be imaged with the staggering, gambolling lamb. And it seems perhaps even more strange that simply hearing Jesus spoken of in this kind of way seems to be enough for two of John’s disciples to decide that they are going to follow him. Here in John’s gospel we don’t have the surprise of Jesus calling disciples for no apparent reason, and them following, again for no apparent reason other than that they have been called. John’s story is differently peculiar. Here, having heard John call Jesus a lamb, they simply start following him. They are not invited, they just do. Which is, to say the least, unusual behaviour. Jesus notices that this is what is happening and turns to them and asks them what they want, to which he does not get an answer, he gets the simple response ‘Rabbi’ – ‘Teacher’. Where upon he extends the invitation to them to see where he was staying. Andrew dashes off to get his brother Simon, telling him ‘we have found the Messiah’. Then Jesus renames Simon ‘Peter’ – for no apparent reason, at least that we can see at this moment in the text, anyway.

This whole narrative is full of oddities. John calling Jesus a lamb, disciples following without having been called, changing someone’s name, seemingly arbitrarily.

And our other passages from scripture today contain other seeming surprises. They take us to places that we might not expect to go. We have Isaiah, prophesying around the exile of Israel. A prophet not known for holding back on the failings and weaknesses of Israel, and accounting for what has happened to them because of their sin. And yet, this broken and seemingly abandoned people, split up, a large part of them carted off to live in a foreign land under a foreign ruler told that they will be given to be a light to the nations, and bring salvation to the ends of the earth. The prophet says: Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, “Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.” We have this extraordinary sense of role reversal somehow – that the weak things, the despised and abhorred, the slaves, will be the ones that ultimately Kings shall stand up for. In the most broken of moments in the history of Israel, it is disclosed once again to the

people that their role is one with universal significance, one in which they will be a blessing to the nations, and light in the darkness, and bring salvation, not just to the chosen people of God, but to the whole world.

Which brings us to the Corinthians. The Corinthian Church was called to be the people of God, the followers of Jesus, the body of Christ in Corinth. Paul writes in effusive terms about how they are sanctified – made holy, by being in Christ. It is quite the write-up he gives them. He is not describing them in the terms of the lowly humble lamb, or the despised and abhorred. No. They have been given the grace of God, they have been enriched in Christ – in speech and and knowledge of very kind, the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among them, they lack no Spiritual gift. Christ will strengthen them so they are blameless on the day of the Lord.

What is so odd about this is perhaps not immediately obvious if all that we do is to read this little passage on its own. We might get the sense that Paul is praising a praiseworthy bunch of folk and that it is all quite straight forward really. But as soon as one reads on, you realise that Paul is saying these remarkable and wondrous things about the most hopeless and wretched bunch of folk. They get drunk at communion, the rich eat everything up before the poor get there. The fall out and dispute amongst themselves over who has the best Spiritual gifts or not. A divided people who are behaving appallingly. And yet – Paul addresses them as the Church of Christ, sanctified and made holy and full of grace with all the gifts they need.

In all our readings this morning we find unlikely people and situations. We find the logic of the world turned upside down. Broken and scattered faithless Israel will bring salvation to the ends of the earth, the drunken and debauched Corinthians will manifest the grace of God and the fruits of the Spirit and be ultimately found blameless, and the son of God is not a lion, but a lamb. It is as though God takes the weak things of the world to show the way to the strong. But that takes us into next weeks reading.

But another strand that runs through all of this is about the all too obvious, so obvious that we miss it sometimes, reality that God has always engaged with the world through calling a people. God called Abraham and Sarah to bring Israel into being, God's people who will indeed shine a light among the nations of the world. The first thing that Jesus does at the start of his ministry is to call disciples to walk the way with him, to share the ministry with him, and continue it after his death, resurrection and ascension. God called the Church in Corinth, in all its manifest faults and failings to be the body of Christ. To be witnesses to good news in the complex and tricky place that was the city of Corinth. God calls weak, fallible human beings, subject to sin, who frequently get everything inside and upside down, and somehow or other uses them for the Good, for work which begins to shape the world that bit more like the kingdom.

And God has called us. Downing Place United Reformed Church, to be the holy, sanctified body of Christ here in this place. To witness to this city that a lamb who was nailed to a cross is the Lord of all creation and transforms lives and the lives of communities and the life of the world. And that is perhaps as surprising as the fact that God managed to use the Church in Corinth to do that, or the broken people Israel in exile to do that. And yet that is our call, and God's Spirit will indeed equip us with the gifts we need to respond to that call, to live out that good news, to bear witness to that light, here in this place and throughout the world. And we can wonder at that, and marvel at that, and give thanks for that, as we get up, and follow Jesus where he would have us go. Amen.