

John 1.29-42

This morning we find ourselves at the moment when Christ begins his ministry in the world. Surrounded by crowds of people who have realised their need for forgiveness and new life, people who are at the point of making a life-changing new start. Perhaps people just like you and me beginning a new year with all sorts of good intentions.

In many ways the birth of Jesus which we celebrate at Christmas was almost-hidden from view. The only ones who knew about it were a young couple far from family and friends and a few local shepherds. Not until the arrival of the Magi did the world start to take notice of this new-born baby, but even though the Magi traditionally represent all the peoples of the world coming to worship the new-born King, at that point only a tiny number of people had even seen him.

It's John the Baptist, the last and the greatest of all the prophets, who proclaims Jesus is 'The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world' to the crowds gathered at the side of the river Jordan. It was a moment of revelation. John recognized the inward and spiritual truth in the outward and physical presence of Jesus. John would have known his cousin Jesus throughout his life.

In fact you could say that their first meeting took place even before either of them was born.

Shortly after the angel Gabriel announced that Mary had been chosen to be the mother of Jesus, she set off to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was also pregnant. She was to be the mother of John the Baptist whose birth had also been foretold by the message of an angel. Mary, the young unmarried mother, and Elizabeth, her older cousin. Two women, as unimportant and immaterial as any in their day, greeted one another in those long and strange days before the birth of their sons.

And just as we can feel suddenly startled to discover that we're in the presence of holiness, the unborn John the Baptist leapt in his own mother's womb as the two women greeted one another. It's sometimes described as a silent alleluia! John the Baptist, still in the womb, became the first to recognise the presence of his Saviour, before either of them had uttered their first cry. Nobody would have realized what was taking place at that moment, they were just two pregnant women greeting one another with an embrace. But if the unborn John the Baptist really did leap in his mother's womb when his mother embraced Mary then the outward and visible sign of 2 pregnant women contained an inward and spiritual grace of recognition.

The image of the lamb of God is one which would have been utterly familiar to John from the Hebrew scriptures. The very identity of the Jewish people was bound up in the Passover lamb – each time they gathered to eat the Passover lamb it was to recall the liberation of Israel from Egypt by Moses. When Abraham went up to the place of sacrifice his son Isaac asked “Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?” Abraham replied “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son”. When John the Baptist described Jesus as the Son of God he was using the title in relation to that same Lamb of God, the lamb which God himself had provided for the sacrifice. In Isaiah’s Servant Songs the one who “was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, was oppressed, and was afflicted, and yet like a lamb that was led to the slaughter did not open his mouth”.

It’s clear that John’s prophetic acclamation of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world soon emerged as one of the most important titles given to Jesus. Paul speaks of “Christ our Passover Lamb who has been sacrificed.” The Book of Revelation has 36 references to the Lamb, in chapter 5, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain” and “To the Lamb be praise and honour, glory and might, forever and ever!”

By the C7th the image of the Lamb of God, often carrying a flag of victory, the symbol of Christ’s triumph over death, was seen in mosaics and on altars, and by the Middle Ages depictions of the Lamb of God holding the flag of victory had become common place. Perhaps we may be most familiar with the image on pubs known as the Lamb and Flag.

By 725 the Venerable Bede confirmed that the hymn we know as the Angus Dei had become an essential element of the Eucharistic prayer, a tradition we continue to this day. Immediately after the consecration the priest breaks the communion wafer and holds it up to be seen and the choir and congregation respond with the Angus Dei, the hymn of adoration and recognition – ‘Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us’, the phrase which is repeated in the Gloria. Of all the titles we give to Jesus it is the Lamb of God which is repeated again and again in the liturgy, because it takes us to the very heart of the Eucharistic mystery.

And just as John the Baptist recognised the walking sacrament that is Christ we too have the opportunity to recognise the same Lamb of God today, when we are invited to recognise the inward and spiritual truth contained in the outward and visible signs of the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

I wonder if I can encourage you today to look up from your prayers when you hear those words this morning. Because Linda will hold up the consecrated bread and wine so that we too can recognize Jesus, the Lamb of God, made manifest before us this morning, just as his cousin John the Baptist recognized him on the banks of the river Jordan.

This sacrament, this manifestation of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, is offered to each one of us. At every Eucharist we are invited to enter into the great mystery of our salvation, the triumph of the Lamb who was slain but whose sacrifice has brought about our salvation, offered to us once more as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. Perhaps you too might even find yourself offering a silent alleluia...

For Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and blessed are all those who are called to his supper.

Let us pray,

Today the blinding mist of our world
is dispersed by the Epiphany of our God.
Today things above keep feast with things below,
and things below commune with things above.
Lord Jesus Christ, in you the Father
makes us and all things new.
Transform the poverty of our nature
by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives
make known your heavenly glory. Amen