



Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One beautiful Sunday morning a priest wakes up, sees how great the weather is, and decides to call in sick. He phones the Bishop and says he's not well and can't say the Mass that day. The Bishop says not to worry, he'll sort things out.

As soon as he's off the line with the bishop, the priest grabs his clubs and runs off to the golf course. Up in Heaven, St Peter sees this and immediately tells God "Look at that - he's phoned in sick and now he's going to play golf," God looks down and says "Don't worry, I'll fix this."

Down on the course, the priest comes to the first tee, sets up his shot, swings, and then "BAM!" - the ball flies true, it's a hole in one. Overjoyed, the priest rushes to the second tee, swings away and "BAM!" - another hole in one. On the third tee - just the same, the priest is nearly delirious with happiness and every hole turns out the same: at the end of the course he's played 18 holes with a score of 18. St Peter looks down and says to God "I thought you were going to punish him?"

"I am," says God. "Who can he tell?"

It seems to be a part of human nature that we think that God might be out to get us. We can't help but imagine this all-powerful being looking down at us, seeing our every sin and mistake, and just waiting for the change to get us back for the things we've done wrong. This human instinct is so strong that almost every human culture has devised some way of trying to appease God by giving him some sacrifice to take our place.

In most cultures it was traditionally animals that we offered – as though we were saying, "God, I know you'd like to kill us so how about we make a deal: I'll kill this animal and give it to you instead of you killing me." That's where we get a phrase like "Lamb of God," which John uses in today's Gospel to describe Jesus. The sacrifice of a lamb at the Passover festival or in the Temple was the highest level of sacrifice in ancient Israel's sacrificial system – and other ancient religions took a similar view of things.

So what does John mean when he says that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? In the context of ancient religions and human assumptions about God we might assume that he means that Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice – a lamb so worthy that his death will placate God’s anger once and for all. As you may have guessed, I don’t think that’s what John has in mind here.

Perhaps a good place to start is actually with the phrase “the sin of the world.” John says that Jesus has come to take that away – and do you notice that it is “sin” singular not “sins” plural? The Gospel is telling us about one sin, a sin that the whole world shares in, a sin that is – in a way – at the root of all other sins. But what is that sin? If we look farther along in John’s Gospel we see a definition of it offered by Jesus himself. In John chapter 16 Jesus is talking to his disciples at the Last Supper and he’s telling them that the Holy Spirit is coming and when the Holy Spirit comes he will “prove the world wrong about sin . . . because they do not believe in me.”

In other words, Jesus is telling us, the sin of the world is that we are wrong about sin. Our attitude about what we do wrong is, itself, wrong. Our human nature tells us that our sins make God angry, that our sins make God want to punish us, and that our sins cause God to be out to get us. Then Jesus shows up. And this where the incarnation is so important to our understanding of God. Jesus shows up and he’s not just talking about God, he is God. He is the second person of the Trinity in flesh and blood as a human being. That means that when we see Jesus and see how he treats people that we are seeing God and how God treats people.

And what is that we see? We see Jesus refusing to cast the first stone against the woman caught in adultery; we see Jesus forgiving thieves, liars, and cheats, and inviting them into the Kingdom of God; we see Jesus saying that we should love our enemies and forgive those who hurt because that is who God is. Jesus doesn’t pretend that sin isn’t sin – he acknowledges that sin is bad and even confronts us with the extent of our sinfulness. But more importantly he brings us the Good News that God is going to be faithful to stick with us in loving relationship despite our sins and failures. God has not abandoned us to our sin, God has entered into our sin with us to help us bear the pain it brings and to heal us from brokenness that causes us to sin.

That is how Jesus, the Lamb of God, takes away the sin of the world – not by appeasing an angry God who is out to get us, but by healing our distorted, broken view of God so that we stop thinking the wrong things about sin and start thinking the right things about God. The sin of the world is the sin of thinking false

and damaging things about God. Jesus reveals God to us and in so doing he begins the process of taking that sin away.

My encouragement to you, and to myself, this Sunday morning is simply this: let Jesus do his healing work. Talk to him in prayer, receive his life into your life through the Eucharist, think about who he is and how he lived, and let that communion between you and him change your view of God. Because when our view of God begins to change to look more like Jesus, then our view of other people, and our relationships with other people, will also begin to heal and change.

To paraphrase today's collect: "Almighty God, whose Son is the Lamb of God that takes away our sin: Grant that we, your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of his glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth."

Amen.