

**Sermon**

Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> January, 2008

Lessons      Isaiah 49: 1 – 7      1 Corinthians 1: 1 – 9      St John 1: 29 – 42

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Bestow Your light upon us, O Lord; so that, being rid of the darkness of our hearts, we may attain to the true light; through Jesus Christ, who is the Light of the world. Amen.

**The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said,  
‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’**

*St John 1: 29*

Beginning with an Advent sermon at Yale in 1971 and well into the mid-1980s, the Dutch Roman Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen, often repeated a story that he had heard in Europe. During World War Two, a German prisoner of war was languishing in one of Siberia’s death camps. By the wars end, he was emaciated, hopelessly depressed, and near death. He despaired about the nature of life, questioned the value of life and was broken by the meaninglessness of it all. One day, he received a brief letter from his wife. To his astonishment, he realised that she was still alive! His spirit revived, and once again he wanted to live. Henri Nouwen said, ‘We are like this. God has sent us a letter, telling us that he is real and preparing a wonderful place for us when, at our deaths, we come home.’ Nouwen said that God has sent us a letter. John the Baptist, raised his arm, directed the attention of his disciples to Jesus and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ Behold, the Lamb of God. Look, see, the Lamb of God.

The Roman Catholic priest, Raniero Cantalamessa, who was a preacher to the papal household under John Paul II gets to the heart of the message of the gospel and restates in his own way the declaration of John the Baptist. Cantalamessa said:

The point is Jesus Christ. Whenever the Holy Spirit comes in a new and fresh way upon the Church, Jesus Christ comes alive. Jesus Christ is set at the centre. He is proclaimed in Spirit and power, which means in the power of the Spirit.

This is the first model of evangelisation and if we want to re-evangelise our secularised, modern world, this is how we must start: Jesus Christ in the centre, Jesus Christ as Lord. This is, I repeat, the model of any evangelisation. We must start by presenting to modern man the person of Jesus, or better still, by helping modern mankind to come into a personal relationship with Jesus.

What the world needs is to have a personal relationship with Jesus as Saviour and Lord. We have developed such a huge heritage of doctrine that we don't realise that this is too much for a person who does not yet know Jesus, who doesn't understand who Jesus is.

We must proclaim Jesus as Lord and Saviour, helping people to grasp what it means to have Jesus as their Saviour, not in a theoretical way, but that every day they have a Saviour, someone who will lift them from the fatigue of the day, of their sin, and their mistakes, and who renews them. He saves us. When you proclaim this living, crucified and risen Jesus, something always happens.

Cantalamessa said that what the world needs is to have a personal relationship with Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Those words of John to his own disciples are words we need to hear and take to heart today: 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.' The prophet Isaiah said, 'My God shall be my strength.' The Church has over two thousand years of history behind it and a cloud of witnesses in heaven and on earth who know Jesus as their God and their strength. When the covenanter, James Guthrie, was led from his cell to his execution, he declared, 'This is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.' That is the strength that comes from a personal, passionate and committed relationship with Jesus.

Simone Weil, the twentieth century French philosopher and mystic, said of the Sacrament of Bread and Wine, 'My heart has been transplanted, for ever, I hope, into

the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the [Table]...even that Eternal Beatitude...is a state where to look is to eat.’ With the story of Moses and the serpent in mind, Simone Weil wrote:

Whoever looked up at the brazen serpent lifted on a pole was preserved from the poison of snakes. I think it is a sacrament simply to look at the host and the chalice during the elevation with this thought in mind.

With the soul of a mystic, Weil looked at the Bread and Wine and saw Christ. At our celebration of Holy Communion, we recite the words of John, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.’ The disciples of John heard the proclamation about Jesus and they sought him out for themselves. Perhaps the only people who ever find Jesus are those who search for meaning in their life and for God, and who, in some sense, set out on a journey. Every year five million people travel to Lourdes; in the summer, six thousand young people a week make their way to Taizé; and there are pilgrims to Rome and Iona and many other places every week. John the Baptist raised his arm, directed the attention of his disciples to Jesus, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God.’ The disciples, one of whom was Andrew, followed Jesus and they asked him, ‘Where do you live?’ ‘Where dwellest thou?’ Can we not see in the words of the disciples a hunger for spiritual fulfilment, for the blessing of God in their lives, and for all that is wrong in their lives to be taken away? With their tongues they say, ‘Where do you live?’ and with their heart and soul they say, ‘We want to live there too.’ Our study of the written Word, our prayers and our participation in public worship are all vehicles on our personal pilgrimage. ‘Where do you live?’

The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. What does that mean? The Lamb takes away the sin of the world. Calvin said:

By taking away the sins of the world by the sacrifice of His death, He reconciles men to God. Christ certainly bestows other blessings upon us, but the chief one, on which all the others depend, is that by appeasing the wrath of God He brings it to pass that we are reckoned righteous and pure. The source of all the streams of blessings is that by not imputing our sins, God receives us into favour.

All Christians buy into the doctrine of atonement: all, in some sense, believe that Christ's death brought reconciliation between God and humanity. It was an atoning death. Calvin believed that Christ died to appease or satisfy the wrath of God. Dr David Yonggi Cho tells this most moving story.

During the Korean War many people went to Busan, in Korea's far south. Most people living in Busan, my home then, were very poor, living from day to day. There were not even any jobs to be found.

Because we were desperate for food, we even stole. When American soldiers started hauling coal by freight train from Busan's harbour, many young boys like myself would climb into the filled freight cars like hungry ants. We stole enough coal to sell, wanting to buy enough food and clothes to make it through a small portion of the harsh winter.

One day a group of refugees climbed up on a cargo train to steal coal. Then an American military policeman came running toward them, shouting for them to get down. Frightened, they jumped out of the cargo train.

One small seven-year-old boy was among the group fleeing. He started to run with the rest of the group when he saw some coal that had fallen under the train. He crawled under the train to retrieve that coal. Just as he was about to reach the coal, the train began to move.

Then one middle-aged man ran near the train. With a burst of his full strength he pushed the boy to safety, clear of the railroad tracks. In the next moment we heard the cracking of this man's bones as the train's steel wheels tore his body apart. That man had given his life for the young boy. That man was the young boy's father.

It is a most moving account of the costliest sacrifice. It has been used many times as an illustration of the appeasement or satisfaction of the wrath of God: Jesus takes our place. I do not mock this theory of atonement, but neither do I accept it. I can believe in a God who demands a blood sacrifice to satisfy His wrath. So, what does

it mean when we say, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’?

The prophet, John, was using the sacrificial language of the Old Testament. In the ancient Jewish ritual a man would sometimes lay his hands on the head of a lamb and confess his sins, as if transferring his sin and guilt to the lamb, which was then sacrificed on his behalf. It could literally be interpreted as transferring the sins to the lamb, but it need not be so. Above all, it was a ritual which liturgically witnessed to the divine readiness to pardon. The late Professor Tom Torrance said, ‘No one will ever be able to explain fully just how the death of Jesus takes away our sin and guilt. The mystery is as unfathomable as the love of God.’ Because Jesus embodies God’s unconditional love, the love of the Forgiving Father, the love that would not even let his prodigal son humble himself before him. This is not a God looking for a blood sacrifice. Jesus is the Lamb because, in declaring God’s love and forgiveness to Jew and Gentile alike, He takes away our sin. In announcing that we live in the light of the forgiveness of God, that light shines on us all the time: Jesus takes away the sin of the world. In Jesus, God commands us to forget our sins. He has blotted them out; He has forgotten them. We are free.

‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.’ We need that personal, passionate and committed relationship with Jesus. We need to hear ourselves ask Jesus, ‘Where do you live?’ And, we need to take to heart of liberating message of the gospel: the light of forgiveness shines upon you. Live conscious of that love everyday.

Amen.