

**On the Cross, what's God up to ... like a Lamb to the slaughter
SPH Tuesday in Holy Week**

Little Lamb, who made thee?

What pictures come to mind with those words?

And what about with these?

Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And finally, what about the word sacrifice?

It's a word we use quite a lot, but perhaps rather loosely. People sacrifice ambition for the sake of service; or a place in a national sports team to be with their wife in childbirth. Sacrifice is giving up something important or valuable. We can, of course, look at the death of Christ this way. He gave up something valuable – his own life. But it's not the only key to unlocking the mystery of the cross as sacrifice.

For led like a lamb to the slaughter takes us somewhere else.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

says Isaiah. And why did he use this image? Well, because Israel slaughtered lots of lambs and offered many different sacrifices.

There are burnt offerings, though these were usually birds. There are sin offerings and guilt offerings (for inadvertent or deliberate sin). And in both of these the way that the animal's blood is used – sprinkled on the altar – is very important. Then there are communion sacrifices which were shared: a part for God, a part for the priest, and a part for the person making the sacrifice. This last part was itself then shared with family and friends, highlighting the fact that this sacrifice is all about creating union between the one making the offering and God.

Led like a lamb that is led to the slaughter – to placate, to say sorry, to create union.

Or perhaps led like a goat? Though it doesn't have the same resonance, does it?

Yet on the Day of Atonement there was a very important ritual involving two goats. One goat was sacrificed for the sins of the people. The other had a rather different fate: the High Priest laid hands on it, symbolically transferring to it all the sins of the community. But this goat was not sacrificed; it was led into the desert and with it went all the sins of the people – the original scapegoat. Behold the Goat of God who takes away the sin of the world?

Perhaps all this reminds us once again that we must sit light to this language, recognizing that it's about background, that it in relation to Jesus it's metaphor.

But while we're looking backwards we must also look at Sinai. To mark the Covenant that God had made with Israel, Moses offered a sacrifice (oxen this time, but it

doesn't matter) and poured half of the blood over the altar and threw the other half over the gathered people of Israel. The old Covenant was sealed in blood.

That's one of the things remembered every Passover. Passover's origins are in a communion sacrifice offered in extraordinary circumstances, in a hurry, the people dressed and ready to flee. The victim was an unblemished lamb (now we're back to where we started). The lamb's blood had to be spread on the lintels of the house as protections against the angel of death which would pass over the land. This is the beginning of Exodus, of liberation, of Covenant – the great acts by which God freed his people from slavery. Jesus' passion and death are enacted against this background: they happen at the Passover Festival. All of this would be fresh in people's minds. And Jesus says, this is my blood of the New Covenant which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Adore the Lamb of God who sheds his blood for you.

Old Testament sacrifices are much more than the stereotype would have it, much more than a means of appeasing an angry God. And when this language of sacrifice is used about Jesus, then we can see God using the idea, but turning it on its head, going far beyond it, asking questions of it, exploding it in the outstretched arms of love on the cross. These rich images allow of no simple view of Jesus' death as sacrifice. Especially as the one sacrifice that is utterly prohibited is human sacrifice.

As Jesus strides into the pages of the New Testament, his path crosses that of his cousin John, who immediately says: 'Look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' At once we are put into sacrifice mode, into sin offering, into Day of Atonement (forgetting the goat for the moment).

And others make hay with the idea.

'God appointed him as a sacrifice for reconciliation, through faith, by the shedding of his blood' says Paul.

'You know that the price of your ransom from the futile way of life handed down by your ancestors was paid, not in anything perishable like silver or gold, but in precious blood as of a blameless and spotless lamb, Christ' says Peter.

And Hebrews tells us that Jesus did what the sacrificial system of Israel could never do. His death gives us 'confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he has opened for us through the curtain'. In a way Hebrews reminds us that the language of sacrifice and substitution is no longer necessary, because in coming amongst us in Christ, and in dying on the cross as Christ, God has acted decisively to reverse the conditions of alienation that made people think these were the ways to relate to God. Instead God has opened a new way in the attraction of love and the free gift of reconciliation.

But still the imagery plays in our minds, especially of the lamb led to the slaughter.

Adore the Lamb who was led to the slaughter.

There's something else Hebrews does. Hebrews returns us to Mount Sinai, where the blood is sprinkled over the people, and compares the shedding of Christ's blood with that event.

When we talk about the cross as sacrifice we can hold Jesus as a parallel to the Passover Lamb, the Lamb which was slain so that its blood (his blood) could be sprinkled as a sign of salvation, so that its flesh (his flesh) could be shared by all the people. Exodus and Covenant were God's great saving events for his people the Jews. The death of Jesus, the new covenant in his blood, is God's new, great and final saving event for all people.

So, when we adore the Lamb who is led to the slaughter, we adore the Son for giving himself in perfect love and obedience to the Father and God, fulfilling God's promises.

The Lamb takes away sin from us and the power of sin over us. The Lamb is the Lamb of the covenant, opening for us a new relationship, through the shedding of blood, a relationship in which we can be and are united with one another, with Christ and with the Father.

Adore the Lamb who was slain.

Blood of the Lamb,
 slain from the foundation of the world,
 the same, yesterday, today, and forever:
Blood of the Lamb
 that pleads for sinners in the heavenly places,
 one sacrifice, complete:
Blood one and the same for all:
Blood that never changes,
 Lord, by thy blood we pray
 unite us and make us one with thee.