

Sermon Epiphany 2/Ordinary Sunday 2 Year A 2023

The season of Christmastide is now over for another year. The Christmas tree is all packed up and the crib is put away. We settle now into a short period of these green Sundays after Epiphany. And in just a short few short weeks launch into Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima before the holy season of Lent commences late February. But before we leave the imagery and motifs of Christmas for good for another year, perhaps we could pause – at least in our mind’s eye – on one important aspect of our Christmas celebrations.

Central to the telling of the story of Christmas - and our depictions of that story - are the figures of the shepherds. It’s unfortunate that our own manger scene we have had set up here in the north transept has only one shepherd figure and just a few sheep. To remedy the situation, my own nativity set at home (which I have built up over the years) has something like five shepherds and ten sheep! The inclusion of the shepherds in the Christmas story has proved the starting point of many rich reflections. We note that they are the first to hear the good news of the birth of the Son of God; that they are granted the dignity of an angelic visitation; that they are marginal figures, literally on the edge of town; that they say something of the poverty of humankind, as a reflection on the poverty of the eternal Word made flesh; that they represent the poor of Israel, the poor in general, God’s first love; that this further stresses the humility and the poverty of the child in the manger; that their presence points to the David, the shepherd king of Israel; that they become the first evangelists, themselves going out to share the marvels they have heard and seen.

But the inclusion of the shepherds in the Christmas story points to something far more. And just as the manger – the feeding trough of animals - the Christ child is laid in seems to suggest something of Christ’s mission to be food for hungry humanity, so the presence of the shepherds suggests something of the actual ministry of Christ himself. Their presence suggests the idea of Jesus the good shepherd, such an endearing image in the gospels. But also, the idea of Jesus the sheep. And this idea is explicitly highlighted in the gospel we have heard proclaimed today, *Jesus the Lamb of God*.

The presence of the shepherds, then, does not just fill in a space reserved for sentimentality. They do not just appear in the story as some sweet detail. Their presence at the birth of Christ points not only to his ministry as shepherd of Israel, but also to his end, his death as the sacrificial lamb.

Now, the inclusion of this important motif of shepherds, and sheep and lambs really shows a remarkable harmony through the different gospels. And although they do this with different emphases and with different contexts, the evangelists want to draw out the same important points. And this helps to remind us that within the gospels there is a unity of vision. It is important to remember that in the gospel we *do not* simply have one story after another story, or one set of sayings, and then another set of sayings. And this is the impression we can get in the way we hear the gospel in the Sunday liturgy. We (mostly) hear small, bite-sized portions and so we can miss the interrelatedness and connection of the whole narrative. The gospel writers approach their work with a unified vision. This means small details like shepherds at the manger, or a crazy man on the banks of the Jordan pointing to someone saying, *there, there is the lamb of God* means something. The details point to a bigger picture.

When John indicates Jesus as the Lamb of God we must immediately be alerted to the huge importance of lambs in the Jewish system of sacrificial worship. Lamb was not just part of a diet. As we approach Australia day, the Lamb Council of Australia has put out its annual humorous commercial seeking to remind us of the importance of lamb in our national diet. For festive occasions, lamb most likely would have featured on the table of first-century Judeans. But mostly, sheep were reared for temple offerings. Shepherds, even those gathered on the outskirts of Bethlehem, were in all likelihood raising flocks for that purpose: to be sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem.

Now, the evangelist John does not tell us anything about the birth of Jesus. But how interesting it is that at the start of his gospel, he echoes a detail so important to Luke at the start of his gospel. Both recognize that in some way the start of Jesus' life and the start of his public ministry this aspect of Jesus' ministry needed to be highlighted.

When John the Baptist points to Jesus on the banks of the Jordan, the second part of his exclamation makes explicit the first part. John declares, *Behold the lamb of God*. And this is evocative and loaded enough as it is. But to make clear what he means by that, John goes on: the Lamb of God, *who takes away the sins of the world*. The second part of the statement makes clear the first. The lamb of God will be the one who takes away sin. In this, then, there are two important Old Testament allusions. The first is from the striking Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. There we hear how the suffering servant of God is compared with the lamb that is led to the slaughter '*Like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.*'

The second and more important allusion is the Passover lamb. Jesus was crucified at the feast of Passover. In fact, in John's gospel Jesus dies at the very hour the Passover lambs are sacrificed. We are meant to understand, then, (at the start of this gospel!) Jesus as the true Passover lamb, the one in whom is fulfilled the significance of the lamb at the time of the exodus from Egypt. As the lamb, Jesus fulfills that sign which speaks of liberation from the dominion and slavery of Egypt; release for exodus; liberation to depart and go out, and journey into the freedom of promise.

In the light of Easter, this symbolism of the lamb takes on an essential understanding of Christ. We find it in Paul: *for our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed for us.* We find it in the first letter of Peter: *you know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.* And we hear it in the book of Revelation. *Then I saw the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.* This image of Jesus as the Lamb, then, was clearly a key means by which the New Testament writers came to understand the person and work of Christ.

In the terms of the Baptists' proclamation, Jesus is to be seen as both the servant of God who bears the sins of the world by his vicarious atonement, and the true Passover lamb who remedies and wipes away the sins of the world. Behind all this is the idea that at the extreme hour of Israel's oppression in Egypt, the blood of the paschal lamb – the Son who became a servant; the shepherd who became the sheep – no longer stands just for Israel, but for the liberation of the world, for mankind as a whole.

So, John on the banks of the Jordan, at the start of this gospel, is really indicating the great theme of Jesus' universal mission. Israel does not exist for itself. The prophets had already noted this. Rather, Israel is chosen by God to become the path by which God intends to come to all men. This idea of universality will come up again and again as the real core of Jesus' mission. By referring to *the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world*, the fourth gospel places this idea right at the beginning of Jesus' journey. We shouldn't mistake the shepherds at the manger as cute bystanders. And Jesus does not just appear on the bank of the Jordan for a bath in a muddy river. No. John identifies that here is the One who fulfills all of Israel's hopes and expectations. That here is the One who will lead all humanity from captivity to freedom. Amen.