

John 1: 29

“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!”

When reading John's gospel we need to note that it was written at least 60 and maybe 70 years after Jesus' death and resurrection and something like 40 or maybe 50 years after the writings of Paul who was the first Christian writer. So in this time there had been significant developments in teaching, reflection on and development of the Christian faith.

We need to see the passage we have read in that light. What is recorded is not intended to be taken literally but is telling us something about how Christian writers by this time were seeing the significance of Jesus' life. I am sure Jesus, in the course of his life never thought of himself as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” These words flow from the theological reflection undertaken by the writer in the light of his understanding and knowledge about the import, the impact of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The writer of the Gospel of John was obviously steeped in understanding of the ancient Hebrew writings, that is the Old Testament to us, and unlike the other Gospels, the writer depicts Jesus in a very “high” fashion as though he was already a divine figure during his time on earth.

Biblical scholars have, over time, debated a plethora of views about what this phrase “Lamb of God” in John's Gospel may refer to. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus attends the annual Passover Festival only once, whereas John records three different occasions of the Passover observance by Jesus---the Passover being one of the most significant Festivals on the Jewish calendar as it celebrated the first Passover as recorded in Exodus Chapter 12.

You may recall the ancient Exodus story. In the story God instructs Moses and the Hebrew people that, in order to convince their Egyptian conquerors to free them and let them go, it is his intention to kill all the first born of the Egyptian people by means of a deathly plague. The children of the Hebrew people will be saved from this fate by each household killing a lamb and smearing the blood on the doorpost and lintels of their dwelling so that the death wielding plague will “passover” their home and they will be saved.

The significance of this event for the Hebrews was immense and it remains a fundamental festival of remembrance for communal Jewish worship today.

So in the Fourth Gospel the evangelist is intent on making a connection between Jesus' death and the Passover and equates Jesus' death as that of the Paschal Lamb--saving the people once again.

But the pronouncement by John the Baptist about the Lamb of God adds a

qualifying phrase: “**who takes away the sins of the world**”. So what do we think that means? The Greek language in which the Gospel is written and the phrase “takes away”, could be better understood in both Greek and Hebrew, as “pardoning” or “forgiveness”. So according to John, Jesus becomes the ultimate Passover Lamb leading to the forgiveness of sins and a new freedom for his people.

But we now live in the 21st Century and our relationship with the Passover Lamb and the mysteries surrounding that are, for most, totally remote. To my mind the use of this “Lamb of God” language has not always been helpful. This language too easily leads to a fundamentalist concept of the atonement which suggests that in order for us to be saved, God required a blood sacrifice of his Son, where a “lamb”, Jesus, had to be slaughtered in order to appease a demanding God. It is a horrifying image that hardly encourages the idea of a loving God who cares for every hair on our heads.

I want to be quite direct about this. Jesus’ death on the cross was not because a vengeful God demanded a scapegoat or a sacrifice. It rather was an ultimate example of Jesus faith in and obedience to God—the ultimate example of Leonard Cohen’s “*the better way*”---and revealing God’s self-giving demonstration of solidarity with, and vindication of, all those who suffer and experience humiliation and shame.

To me that is very clear-cut. This God is a totally self-giving God who will do anything to love us and engage with us particularly when we are at our lowest ebb. But in the context of our discussion today we also have to deal with the concept of sin.

Too often in our highly individualized society we Christians think of sin as being when we, at a personal level, do something wrong such as drinking too much or swearing at someone who annoys us when driving etc. Certainly there are individual sins such as stealing and embezzling or physically assaulting people etc. and whilst these things are obviously undesirable, all of this is a far too narrow an understanding of sin.

A good definition is to say: “ *Sin is when we are completely alienated and separated from God.*”

We Christians believe that we understand the attributes, the values, the principles that flow from God. At its simplest I think God is love. God espouses unconditional, altruistic love and the erasure of inequities and injustice, freeing and empowering us to express ourselves and live to our full potential regardless of colour, creed, sexuality or station. From Jesus’ teaching and life we learn of the barrier-free values that are divine—and how the divine can manifest itself in our lives.

But when we look around the world today it is very hard to see how these values are

present. There is a lot of alienation. As Leonard Cohen says in his song we listened to earlier “ *It seemed the better way, to turn the other cheek, sounded like the truth, but it's not the truth today*”.

And that is an understatement. The world is racked by cruel and pitiless war dislocating the lives of millions. Terrorism related violence is endemic and many people live in fear of the next bomb blast. There are a considerable number of countries that are only ever a step or two from famine and significant health problems for their populations while at the same time we learn that in developed countries, the mega rich are getting richer at the expense of the rest of the world.

It appears to me that alienation from God and God's values reigns supreme. Until the violence stops and until resources are shared equitably and with justice for all, we are certainly separated from God.

We don't need to wallow in guilt but we each need to take responsibility in the widest way possible to work towards a remedy for our world.

So is there any hope on the horizon ?

There are a couple of things that might provide some light for us.

Specific challenges to the biblical views of the cosmos and humanity include astronomy with so many insights into the origins and immensity of the universe, while at the other end of the scale are advances in our knowledge of the human genome that reveal an extensive DNA overlap between human beings and other life forms.

And then perhaps above all we need to note that we live in the post-Darwinian age that postulates that there never was a perfected and completed creation. New galaxies continue to be formed and discovered. The universe is still evolving and still expanding.

The post-Darwinian world also recognizes that there never was a perfect man or a perfect woman. The ancient views have been overtaken by the knowledge we now possess. Human beings are emerging creatures—a work in progress—neither perfect nor fallen—simply incomplete.

It is fascinating too that, whereas initially evolution was thought to have a hard edge operating through competition and natural selection, post-Darwinists such as the respected American scientist Lynn Margulis, have shown that species can evolve and adapt by co-operation---leading to the Gaia hypothesis that asserts that everything on earth, including life on land, the oceans and the atmosphere work together in a sort of symbiosis, an interdependence, as if it were all one living organism.

Perhaps this points us to how our alienation from God can be overcome when seen in modern terms. Of course when we tread this path we must let go of much of the traditional explanations that have gone before. It requires a lot of reflection and thought about our concepts of God.

It is an impossible task to define God, to come to any conclusion about God, as whatever you say about God, God is always more. But I do like the work of Paul Tillich, the great German-American theologian who talks of God as the Ground of Being itself, arguing that the Ground of Being precedes all beings, precedes all other entities, precedes all else *and is not external to life*. It is rather present in the being, in the life, of all things, is infinite and absolutely integral to every part of life and the world.

Along with this continuing wrestle with our concept of God we must also recognize that the 21st Century reality for us remains the physical, dynamic and alive universe. Most incredibly we human creatures have evolved and developed the ability to think beyond ourselves—a consciousness not possessed by any other creature and one that as far as we know, gives us a unique place in the universe. But we must also recognize that we human beings still cannot overcome finiteness and tragedy. We still cannot make for ourselves our own security.

But I do believe that we human beings have innate and hidden capacities upon which to draw---this often-untapped and significant mystery of God, the Ground of our Being.

As our collective consciousness becomes more and more aware, more and more reflective of our interdependence, I carry the hope that the barriers broken down by Jesus can continue to fall.

I carry the hope that our true humanity can continue to evolve.

I carry the hope that the wisdom of our collective minds can be used to positively direct the future evolution of this planet, the hope that we become more and more able to fully embrace life, love, justice and being--drawing on the power of God, the Ground of all Being.

The entire creation, the entire universe will then reflect wholeness, healing and completeness as we, at the same time, attain the full humanity previously experienced in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

It may be a long way off---but it is a wonderful hope.

May it come to pass ! Amen.