

**Behold, the Lamb of God***Psalm 40:1-11; John 1:29-42*

When I went to my first parish in Cupar in 1987, unbelievably 39 years ago (I was ordained when I was 12 years old, you understand) I lived in a modest 15 roomed detached Victorian building, with five bedrooms, a maid's wing, and a croquet lawn at the back. There had been a spate of attempted break-ins on the road where I lived, and the local constabulary came round to give advice about security. Four decades ago home alarms were rare, so the police advised that the driveway and parking area around the manse should be gravelled, so I would hear the crunch of thieving feet or their car wheels approaching the house; and, "Get a dog", they said. So I did. A black, cross-border-collie. Black, because colour co-ordination with my clerical outfit mattered and the dog hairs wouldn't show up. And a border collie, because they're as smart as whips.

I went to the Seafield Cat and Dog Home, and there he was, a sad, brown-eyed collie who was not much more than a pup, and had been thrown from a car and abandoned.

But what to call him? Dogs prefer monosyllabic names, and I wanted something Biblical, so I called him Luke. He was a great dog, and no thieves or robbers ever came near the manse again. He travelled with me around the parish, on home and hospital and care home visits. He went to Sunday School. He became so famous in the town that when he died, some years later, the local newspaper wanted to write an obituary about him.

But there was one problem with him. Whenever we went out for the four daily walks he required, and he wandered a bit further than I would like, I would have to call out, "Luke! Luke!", and he would come running back. But calling out, "Luke! Luke!" caused consternation amongst nearby walkers. "Look at what, look where?" they would ask me.

That's a long, but true shaggy dog story, to get to John the Baptist, and a couple of the disciples including Andrew, and the River Jordan, and Jesus, and "*Behold*, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world."

In this story, John the Baptist, in my imagination, is standing and pointing. "Behold." Look, notice, pay attention. But what are we to look at?

The Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world.

John's Gospel was written many years after the Jesus events. There is no nativity story but there are two temple-cleansing stories. He records no parables and identifies Jesus' miracles as 'signs'. He quite often relates not simply *what* Jesus did or taught, but also *why* or *for what reason* He did such things. John's readers were not to miss that this earthly Jesus was also God's Son.<sup>i</sup> John is interpreting Who Jesus was by giving Him certain titles. Like this one: the Lamb of God.

How radical it would have sounded to those who first heard it. Here was the Messiah of God, from Heaven. Not a lion, not a king, not a conquering general, but a Lamb. A lamb was for sacrifice. It was the animal of Passover. The creature of atonement. The symbol of blood spilled to cover sin. A lamb meant meekness and vulnerability. People in John's day were expecting a powerful, political hero who would take on the Romans, and maybe the unscrupulous religious leaders. Instead they got a sacrificial victim. Is that what they saw, or understood, when John the Baptist said, "Behold the Lamb."

Or would they see the *symbols* John alluded to: the old story of Moses and the Exodus, and the Passover Lamb, whose blood marked the doors of the people of God so that their homes would be 'passed over' when God's judgement came to Egypt? The Passover Lamb saved God's people from physical destruction; Jesus the Lamb would save God's people from spiritual destruction. Not just the children of Israel, but the children of all God's world.

Would they think of the prophet Isaiah writing about the suffering servant of God, being led like a lamb to the slaughter?

Would they think of the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, in the Book of Leviticus, when the High Priest would symbolically lay all the sins of the people onto the head of a goat, and the goat was then driven out into the wilderness, to 'carry away' their sins. Was this Jesus, the Lamb of God, the One Who would carry all sins far away from us?

"Behold, the Lamb of God." Look, notice, pay attention, fix your eyes on Him. Why? Because this lamb-like Jesus, paradoxically embodying the *power* of God, has come to take away the sin of the world. His power, working in us, through us, with us, or sometimes despite us, is going to take the brokenness, and the hurtfulness and the awfulness away.

The Lamb of God John commands us to *Behold* goes far beyond the weak, vulnerable animal ready for sacrifice and slaughter. This Lamb is powerful. It has the power to make things different, healed, transformed, better.

Why hasn't all the brokenness, and hurtfulness, and awfulness gone away yet? Not because the Lamb is ineffectual. But might it be because we have stopped beholding? Have we stopped fixing our eyes on Jesus. Do we think we don't need any help? That we can fix everything. That we are self-sufficient. "I'm fine. I'll manage."

I am here to say today that the evidence suggests otherwise. For you and for me. We need all the help we can get. That is what John the Baptist is pointing towards, when he says, "Behold, the Lamb of God." Here is the help you need when you know how much help is required. And here is the help you need, even when you didn't know you needed help. We work together with Jesus to begin, and begin again, until at last, the help is no longer needed because with Jesus, we co-operate with the removing of sin from the world. And from us.

We need to *Behold* not just once, but many, many times, until we stop looking beyond Jesus, or away from Jesus, but at Jesus, and work with our belief that He is the help we need for ourselves, and for our world.

Who is Jesus, the Lamb of God? Jesus is the person Who first makes you aware of your own solitude, and His, and helps you escape it so that you, in turn, may help Him. It is thanks to Jesus that you can fall silent without shame, and unburden yourself without loss of face.<sup>ii</sup> In this season of Epiphany, when God reveals Himself to the world, God unveils Himself in so many guises, here as a Lamb, with all the significance embedded in that rich meaning to remind us that no matter how bad things are, or how much of a failure we might sometimes feel, we are not alone. Coming towards us, "Behold, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world." The 'Behold' is not spoken once, but twice, because people may not have been paying attention. And if twice, why not three times, four times, a hundred times, as many times as it takes. Behold! Behold! Behold! Until we see, until we believe, until we connect.

The realities of sin and death separate us from goodness and hope. I thought of this when I saw the new film, *Hamnet*. The film is about the death of Shakespeare's son, and may have been the genesis of his play *Hamlet*. It is heart-wrenching and heart-warming at one and the same time, as we observe the many roads people travel as they come to terms with life and death, joy and sorrow. Jessie Buckley and Paul Mescal are sensational.

The end scene shows the drama *Hamlet* being played at London's Globe Theatre. As you know there is a scene of mass killing at the end of the *Hamlet*. In the Globe, the groundlings, the people who don't have seats and stand throughout the play, watch the dying prince fall to his knees. And they reach out to him in that moment. In all the brokenness and painfulness and awfulness of that story, the people reach out. A sea of arms reaching out, and wanting to hold, and pointing, to

comfort, to connect. It seemed to me it signified them saying, 'You are not alone, we are here, be at peace. Behold, we are here.'

So also with Jesus, the Lamb of God. John the Baptist pointed. Come and see. The forgiveness and love. Come and see. The help and healing. Come and see. You are not alone. I am with you to the end, and beyond.

Behold, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world. Behold, the Lamb of God.

Behold! Behold! Behold!

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Troy A Miller, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1, p261*

<sup>ii</sup> Paraphrase from Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea, Memoirs Volume One 1928-1969*