

January 18th, 2026

10.30am Holy Communion All Saints Oakham

Isaiah 53. 4-9, Revelation 5, John 1.39-42

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

In today's gospel reading, we return again to the figure of John the Baptist, having met him at various stages in his career in our readings over the last month or so. This week we move on some weeks or months from last week's reading about Jesus' baptism to other encounters between John and Jesus, and those who were probably followers of John, on the way to becoming Jesus's disciples. John's gospel, is a very structured work, mainly built around seven "signs" – the first being the wedding at Cana in Galilee and the last being the death and resurrection of Jesus. Before the first sign however, John, the gospel writer, not the Baptist, sets out the events of what he clearly sees as the first week, the first seven days of Jesus's ministry. On the first day we hear of an encounter between John the Baptist and some priests and Levites from Jerusalem, where John very clearly says he is not the Messiah but rather, quoting the prophet Isaiah

I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord"

Then on the following days of that first week, John sees Jesus, who he had baptised sometime before, and he calls out

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

Words that resonate down the ages in our worship. We have already used them once in our worship today, and will use them three times more as we come to communion. But what did the Baptist mean by them? What did the gospel writer understand by them? Forty years ago, I wrote an essay on this for my ministerial training, but that has long since been discarded, and to be honest, along with so much else, I can't remember what I actually wrote. I think I got a respectable grade for it however! But, despite not being able to access my wisdom of 40 years ago, I think we can get some clues as to what was meant. The Baptist heard the words at Jesus' baptism.

This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased

This is a direct quote from one of the Servant Songs in Isaiah which describe a Messianic figure, the servant of God who was to suffer for the sins of the people, From today's Old Testament reading

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.

After calling Jesus the Lamb of God, John the Baptist went on to say

I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him

Again, a paraphrase of another passage from Isaiah that talks of the Suffering servant of God that follows on directly from the words heard at Jesus' baptism

I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

So it does seem that the concept of the Suffering Servant of God, the lamb led to the slaughter, was in John's mind when he called Jesus the Lamb of God. In addition it is quite possible that he was also thinking about the incident in the life of Abraham and Isaac when, just as Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God's commands, a lamb was provided for the sacrifice – a substitute if you like.

For John, the writer of the gospel, there was almost certainly another meaning – Jesus as the Paschal lamb – the lamb that was sacrificed at the Passover and whose blood was smeared on to the doorpost of Jewish houses in remembrance of the protection it offered from the destroying angel in the run up to the Exodus. Certainly John's account of the passion sees Jesus dying as the lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple.

So a whole host of possible meanings and it isn't really possible to know precisely what the Baptist thought the phrase to mean, or what John the gospel writer understood it to say. It is probably fair to say however that the first disciples who appear later in the gospel reading, didn't really have much of a clue at that stage.

But whatever the meaning, the words of what we call the Agnus Dei, speak of two concepts that are deeply uncomfortable to the modern listener. The first is sin, or more specifically in this context, the sins of the whole world. The whole concept of sin is difficult for many in our post modern society where any regulation of behaviour, human or divine, is not acceptable to many, which sees us all as free agents allowed to do just what we want. Yet sin is God's diagnosis of how we are, how the world is, that

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

And I would suggest that we all know deep down, that we are not as we should be in our thoughts, and deeds and relationships. One definition of sin is "missing the mark", which seems to me a useful one. Falling short of what we should be. We are not realising our potential, we are not as we should be. But yet we are, each one of us, precious to God, loved by God, and he has a purpose for us, in this life and beyond the grave. What they might be, I really haven't a clue, but it was so important to God that we should become as

we should be, that he took flesh and died for us. Now in my view one of the worst verses in a hymn ever written is the last verse of Once in Royal David's City.

*Not in that poor lowly stable,
with the oxen standing by,
we shall see Him, but in heaven,
set at God's right hand on high;
when like stars His children crowned
all in white shall wait around.*

If heaven is all about waiting around for all eternity, I might prefer another destination. I am sure there is more to it than that – and that God has an eternal purpose for each one of us that is more than hanging about in heaven. I did tentatively suggest we might not have this carol for the nine lessons and carols this year. I was ignored.

But the Lamb of God takes away not just our sins, but the sins of the world. And that I think is hugely important. Whilst humanity might be the source of sin, nonetheless sin and evil seems to permeate all our societies, all human institutions, even the created order itself. Groups can turn on other groups – football fans fighting fans from different clubs at one level, one ethnic group trying to wipe out another on a larger scale. Our commercial and financial systems, whilst having the potential for so much good, can be turned into weapons to inflict and oppress others. The latest technology of Generative AI has the power for great good, but also great evil – as we can see from the ongoing spat about Musk's Grok on his X platform being used to produce sexually explicit content. Evil abounds on a grand scale. And these systems seem to take on a life of their own, out of the control of their creators. But yet the message of the gospel is that Christ came to take away the sins of the world. Paul was to write in his letter to the Colossians.

Through Jesus God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Thinking of the work of God in this way gives us on the one hand a new perspective, a corrective to thinking that what Jesus did is all about us as individuals, but also a call to service – because these institutions, forces that have been unleashed by humanity, need to be redeemed to a large extent by the actions of God's people.

The other concept in the phrase "The Lamb of God" that is deeply uncomfortable and distasteful to modern ears, is that of sacrifice – the killing of an animal as an offering to God. We find this in most early religions, and it seems to have been a common human experience. Somehow the slaughter of an animal, the shedding of its blood, allowed the presence and power of God to come to forgive sins, to bestow blessings and so on. In one of our communion prayers we proclaim that Jesus, as the slaughtered lamb of God

...opened the gate of heaven to all believers....

and allowed the forgiveness of sins to all who believed down through the ages, and brought healing and wholeness. How this occurs is another mystery to me, but the belief of the church is that his sacrifice as the final one that achieved its effects for all time and ages. If nothing else, another sign of the depth of God's love and concern for each one of us, that we should become what we should be in this world and the next. Now we pray in one of our post communion prayers

Send us out, as a spiritual sacrifice, to live and work to your praise and glory.

Words of Thomas Cramner of course, that again call us to mission, to taking the good news of Jesus out into the world in word and in deed.

These are difficult ideas, and apologies if I have been a bit heavy today. But they are important and lie at the centre of the Christian message – that Jesus, the Lamb of God, was the ultimate sacrifice for our sins, for the sins of the world, so that we could be made whole, made in to who we need to be to serve God's eternal purpose for our lives, so that the world can be created anew. I have indicated that there is much that I don't really understand in these issues, and I doubt I ever will this side of heaven. And I suspect that you are the same – and indeed I might have made it worse over the last 10 minutes! But we can take comfort from the rest of the gospel reading. On hearing John cry "Jesus is the Lamb of God", that Andrew and another disciple, almost certainly the gospel writer himself, followed after Jesus and were invited to sit with him and listen to him. It is clear from the conversations that follow after our reading that they thought Jesus might be the predicted Messiah, but they seem not to have understood much else. Nonetheless, even with their limited understanding, they went on to call Peter to come and see Jesus. Peter, the Rock on which Jesus built his church. And on the last day of that first week, we read, after Jesus turned 120 gallons of water into wine

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him

The important thing is not our level of understanding, but to follow, to listen. Belief often comes slowly and gradually. Over the next few weeks and months, we will, week on week, be following Jesus through his ministry and then follow him through another week that all the gospel writers record, through Holy Week, and his final journey to the agony of Gethsemane and the cross and to the joy of Easter Day. The invitation is to us all to follow and to listen and learn, and to accept the forgiveness and wholeness he offers and come to the joy and freedom of Easter.

But there is another use of the concept of the Lamb of God in scripture that I need to mention briefly as I close. In the vision of another John (again, all terribly confusing) recorded in the book of Revelation that we read for the epistle, where we see the Lamb upon the throne in heaven, but a very different lamb, "standing as if it had been slaughtered", with multiple eyes and horns. A heavenly vision, given to encourage the persecuted church, probably at the time of Nero, to reveal the heavenly realities behind their current traumas. In a mind boggling superposition of images, the Lamb is also called

the Lion of Judah, reflecting yet another Old Testament prophecy. And all of this reminded me of a passage from the end of C S Lewis's Narnia story, Voyage of the Dawn Treader where the Pevensie children have sailed to the very edge of the world, and where Lewis's Christian analogy of Narnia becomes explicit.

Between them and the foot of the sky there was something so white on the green grass that even with their eagles' eyes they could hardly look at it. They came on and saw that it was a Lamb. "Please, Lamb," said Lucy, "is this the way to Aslan's country?" "Not for you," said the Lamb. "For you the door into Aslan's country is from your own world." "What!" said Edmund. "Is there a way into Aslan's country from our world too?" "There is a way into my country from all the worlds," said the Lamb; but as he spoke his snowy white flushed into tawny gold and his size changed and he was Aslan himself, towering above them and scattering light from his mane." "Oh, Aslan," said Lucy. "Will you tell us how to get into your country from our world?" "I shall be telling you all the time," said Aslan. "But I will not tell you how long or short the way will be; only that it lies across a river. But do not fear that, for I am the great Bridge Builder.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen