

## Outline of Sermon preached in St Nicholas Islip on 18 January by B Mountford

In the Church's year, today we have arrived at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. When you start to unpack the gospel texts you find, as usual, considerable differences between John and the synoptics, Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Last week we touched on art and pictures as a means of epiphany and revelation.

This week I am struck by the nature of the word picture of Jesus as he is met by John the Baptist in John's Gospel. It's interpretative almost to the point of absurdity; 'Look, here come the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.'

Contrast that with the synoptic approach where people are asking Who is this who heals the sick etc and has command over evil spirits. And in Mark his messiahship is to be kept a secret. When the disciples suggest he is the Messiah, Jesus says in effect: Don't tell anyone.

Of course, John is written say 40 years after Mark. It makes a difference. Christians are working out their theology i.e. what they believe about God and the revelation of God in Christ.

But I want to look more closely at the idea of the Lamb of God. It is an image of sacrifice. Judaism in Jesus' time was a religion of sacrifice. It widely thought that ritually killing a bird or animal Passover in the Temple would atone for sin.

Lamb of God also takes us back to slavery in Egypt and the desperate longing of the Hebrew slaves for freedom, eventually achieved under the leadership of Moses. At the Passover before the Exodus God instructs the Israelites to smear the blood of the Passover lamb on the doorpost of their home and this will be a sign to the angel of death to "pass over" and spare their firstborn children during the final plague in Egypt. This foreshadowed Jesus as the sacrificial "Lamb of God" whose blood brings salvation from spiritual death, a central theme in Christian theology.

Last week we thought in pictures; this week I offer three poems that employ the imagery of lambs. The first two by William Blake – from Songs of Innocence and

### Songs of Experience.

Little Lamb who made thee  
Dost thou know who made thee?  
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.  
By the stream & o'er the mead;  
Gave thee clothing of delight,  
Softest clothing woolly bright;  
Gave thee such a tender voice,  
Making all the vales rejoice!

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!

He is called by thy name,  
For he calls himself a Lamb:  
He is meek & he is mild,  
He became a little child:  
I a child & thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name.

Little Lamb God bless thee.  
Little Lamb God bless thee.

### Songs of Experience

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.  
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
On what wings dare he aspire?  
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,  
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
And when thy heart began to beat.  
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp.  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears  
And water'd heaven with their tears:  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,  
In the forests of the night:  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Blake wrote this in 1794, about thirty years into the Industrial Revolution and he likens the creative mind of God working with mental hammer, chain, furnace, and anvil to make this creature, so finely tuned to killing.

(I extemporised at this point about good and evil, innocence and experience. But I wanted the poetry to speak for itself and concluded with a poem, new to me, by Malcolm Guite a current Cambridge poet, which seemed to me at least to address the idea of a Lamb of God in the age of Trump and Putin and gratuitous violence.

The poem is speaking first of the infant Jesus.

'We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,  
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,  
But he is with a million displaced people  
On the long road of weariness and want.  
For even as we sing our final carol  
His family is up and on that road,  
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,  
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.  
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower  
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,  
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,  
And death squads spread their curse across the world.  
But every Herod dies, and comes alone  
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.'