

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

John 1:29-42 – “God’s Strong Lamb”

When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

Hasn’t it always seemed to be the case that, in any sort of conflict or battle, to decide who was the winner, one only had to look and see which warrior was, in effect, still standing when the dust settled? Well, today’s reading from John’s gospel attempts to change that perception.

During the time of Jesus, the gods that non-Christians worshiped, were those they perceived to be strong gods. These were gods who, the people believed, could not only wreak havoc in the lives of those with whom they were angry, but also bring great rewards to those with whom they were pleased. One reason they chose to worship such gods was that, if a god wasn’t strong enough to do good things for us, what’s the point of worshiping him? After all, what can a weak god do for us?

Even the Jews themselves had a long history of serving a strong god. Their god was a warrior. Their god had been called The Most High, and The Supreme One, and The Lord of Hosts. The Most High was a strong god. The Supreme One was a powerful god. The Lord of Hosts carried out his will by any means necessary.

Well, in the early days of the Christian Church, one of the things that kept many people from converting to Christianity was the fact that the god the Christians worshiped appeared to be weak. The Christian’s god came to Earth, but was apparently unable to overcome the forces of this world. The Christian’s god was executed like a common criminal. Who wants to worship such an apparent loser? Who wants a god who cannot even save himself? After all, if he can’t save himself from the Cross, what’s he going to be able to do for us when we have our own crosses to bear?

So, when John the Baptist announced that Jesus was the “Lamb of God,” he was making a remarkable, if not unthinkable, statement. Why? Because of what people in those days perceived lambs to be.

Sheep were considered to be the stupidest animals on the face of the earth. Without a shepherd, they could not survive on their own. They relied entirely on the shepherd for their food, water, and protection. When you consider the fact that a lamb is younger, and even more dependent upon the shepherd, it doesn’t take a “rocket scientist” to realize that describing your savior – the Son of the Most High God – as a lamb, was unthinkable. Certainly, some might rebut, God exhibited tenderness and mercy, but he is still a warrior, and not a lamb!

So, what’s going on? With two thousand years of history and theology behind us, we understand that John’s gospel was not speaking in literal terms. We’re pretty sure that John’s gospel was looking ahead to the death of Jesus, and drawing a comparison between Jesus’ death

on the Cross, to the death of all those lambs who were sacrificed on Jewish altars, to make the point that the effect of both was to compensate for our sins. Certainly, John's gospel is telling us this much, but I think that it's telling us much more.

What I believe John's gospel also wants us to see, is that Jesus is the "surrogate sufferer." John's gospel wants us to understand that Jesus was willing to sacrifice himself on our behalf, in order to restore our relationship with God. Rather than demanding that we sacrifice ourselves, to make amends for all the bad stuff we did to God, God was willing, instead, to sacrifice himself.

The big question is: Why did God do this? After all the bad stuff that people have done to God, why would God bear the brunt of someone else's justly deserved punishment? Well, he's certainly taking his own advice, and turning the proverbial "other cheek." I think, though, there's more to it.

I think God understands that returning evil for evil simply doesn't work. Sure, punishing an evil-doer may feel good, and it may even feel right. However, I think God understands that, in the long run, violence usually only begets more violence. Since you hurt me, I'll hurt you. To quote the Old Testament book of Exodus (21:23-25): If serious injury is done to you, "you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise." At the time of its writing, that advice probably sounded pretty good, but history has proven that the pattern of violence-following-after-violence becomes its own self-sustaining cycle. Unless... unless someone decides to stop the cycle. Unless the power of evil is taken on, and defeated through love. I believe God realized that the chain of violence had to stop, and the only way to stop it was to love it to death... to love it by death. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)

In other words, Jesus' death enabled the restoration of our relationship with God. But there's even more to it than this. Jesus' death also opens the door to the restoration of our relationships with others. Remember when Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. (Matthew 18:21-22) Jesus' death was God's unqualified declaration that our broken relationships with each other can be healed, and that virtually nothing should stand in the way of that healing. The example that God gave us – that is, the extent to which he was willing to go to heal his relationship with us – is an example that we are to employ in our relationships with each other.

Society may tell us that, when violence is done to us, when relationships have been broken, when trusts have been violated, the best and most appropriate response is to respond to the offender in a similar fashion. But Jesus, the Lamb of God, showed us that, sometimes, there is no price too high to pay to restore that relationship.

Experience has shown us that the winner in a conflict is not necessarily that warrior we find still standing when the dust has settled. The death of Jesus certainly proves that! He wasn't the one still standing, when the sun set on that Good Friday. He wasn't the winner by human standards, but he was certainly the victor by the standards of history, because the example he left for posterity still lives on. He was the victor because he was motivated, first and foremost by love.

The example we are called to be for each other, is that of someone who is quick to forgive, is that of someone who is willing to mend fences, is that of someone who willing to take a loss now in order to gain a victory later. This is also the legacy that we are called to leave for posterity: That, in search of a greater good, the occasional surrender may be the smartest choice we can make, and that choosing to be a lamb, occasionally, rather than a warrior, may be the most loving decision of all.