



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

### ***Behold the Lamb of God***

*Readings: Isaiah 49: 3, 5-6, Ps 39, 1 Corinthians 1: 1-3, John 1: 29-34*

There is a proverb that dates back to the early seventeenth century which runs thus: 'You might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb.'

Put bluntly, if you're going to do something wrong then at least 'go large', make the sin worthwhile.

It stems, of course, from an age when the penal system was ferocious. If you stole anything worth more than a shilling then you were subject to the death penalty. Both a lamb and a sheep were worth more than the minimum requirement for the gallows so the logic was obvious.

The date of the origin of the proverb may give us a clue to another and deeper meaning though. The Lamb, the Agnus, was a symbol of the Faith. Anyone caught in possession of an Agnus might well find themselves in possibly terminal difficulty with the State.

For an Agnus was also a wax seal bearing the imprint of the Lamb of God made from the wax of the Paschal Candle from Rome and blessed by the Pope. In the early seventeenth century, in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot,

the very possession of signs of loyalty to the Church which had been stripped, robbed, suppressed, persecuted and vilified by the new order of the English state was a shortcut to Tyburn tree.

But this Lamb has more significance yet for it proclaims a central understanding of the Faith which Protestantism tried, in vain, to dispense with – that of Sacrifice. For the Reformers the service of Holy Communion was a memorial meal. For the Church it was what it had always been, the offering of the Sacrifice, the acknowledgement of the Real Presence, the Transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine into the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ.

This is a reminder that, even in her most humanly reduced circumstances, the Church retains a power which no monarch or state or law can take away and no-one outside the Apostolic Order can pretend to. That from the basilicas of Rome to the catacombs of the persecuted, from the priest holes of the penal times to the sacred stones used as altars in the bog masses, the Church alone, by the power of the Holy Spirit, presences Christ in the sacrifice of the altar. This is the Lamb that is *'slain from the foundation of the world'*. (Apoc 13v8)

On the wax imprint we can also see that this is the Lamb that bears the flag of the Resurrection marked with the blood cross of martyrdom. This is the Lamb that will preside over the opening of the Seven Seals on the Day of Judgement.

In short the Agnus proclaims a theology, an anthropology, an ontology and an eschatology that is wholly at odds with the vanity and passing power of human states and hierarchies. The Agnus is a revolutionary seal.

It is not so because of some latter day dispute about power and patronage in this little realm of England. It has always been so.

When, in this morning's Gospel, St. John the Baptist points to Jesus and says, 'Behold the Lamb of God. Behold Him who takes away the sins of the world', he is not identifying Christ with a fluffy pet or giving us a rather puzzling addition to the liturgy.

He is referring back to the foundational event of the Salvation of the People of God. Their people enslaved by pagan powers. Their male children put to death in a deliberate act of genocide. Their worship forbidden. The Hebrews are commanded to gather and offer the sacrifice of the spotless lamb. They are to sacrifice him, to eat his flesh and to badge their doorposts and lintel with his blood to turn away the Angel of Death who will sweep the land in a final and decisive plague.

John looks back to this first Passover which set the people of God out on the journey to the Promised Land. He looks forward to the final Passover which will be on Calvary where the blood of this Lamb, the Agnus Dei, the Lamb of God, will be shed for the sins of the world.

This is the Lamb whose blood marks, defends and redeems the Faithful and reconciles them to God. This is the Lamb who will tell His disciples, '*He who*

*eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day'.*

The Agnus is the sign of the almost incredible lengths that God has gone to in love for the redemption of fallen Man.

It is at this moment in the Mass that we return to our knees with adoring gaze and thankful hearts as the priest elevates the glorious mystery of our redemption.

Jesus Christ crucified, risen, ascended, glorified.

*'Behold the Lamb of God. Behold Him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those who are called to the supper of the Lamb'*

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