

## LAMB

Many of you will know this poem by Katherine Tynan:

All in the April evening  
April airs were abroad  
The sheep with their little lambs  
Passed me by on the road.  
The sheep with their little lambs passed me by on the road  
All in the April evening  
I thought on the Lamb of God.  
The lambs were weary and drying  
With a weak human cry  
I thought on the Lamb of God  
Going meekly to die  
Up in the blue, blue mountains  
Dewy pastures are sweet;  
Rest for the little bodies  
Rest for the little feet.  
But for the Lamb of God  
Up on the hill top green  
Only a Cross of shame,  
Two stark crosses between.  
All in the April Evening  
April airs were abroad  
I saw the sheep with their lambs,  
And thought on the Lamb of God.

This title of forms part of our worship week after week after week – O Lamb of God that takes the sin of the world. Hymns abound with it..."worthy the Lamb that died we cry....Lo the Lamb so long expected...At the Lamb's high feast we sing...Crown him with many crowns the Lamb upon the throne.. Just as I am, O Lamb of God I come...Lamb of God we look to thee." There are lots more. The question is, what did John mean when he called Jesus the Lamb of God?

The origin is the time when Jesus comes to John for baptism, identifying himself with the Jews to whom John was speaking. He says of him "Look there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." No-one is absolutely sure what John may have meant by it - it seems to be a mixture of various ideas. There is even the possibility that he never intended to say it at all. The word for Lamb and the word for Servant are the same in the Aramaic that John the Baptist spoke, so maybe he was saying 'Here is the Servant of God.'

But let's assume for the moment he *did* mean 'Lamb', because that is what the Christian tradition has handed on to us. Because there are several words for lamb in Greek, and one is used here, and a different one in another places- for instance in the book of Revelation, scholars have wondered whether it is right to connect all the uses up. But their worries are probably unfounded. John was a writer who loved to draw all sorts of ideas together - he was probably the sort of man who would have enjoyed the intelligence tests that ask you to think of as many uses as you can for a piece of string. He loved to let his mind bring in all sorts of ideas – and so, although we can't easily say dogmatically – 'this is exactly what John was saying', we can look at all

sorts of ideas, and be fairly certain that they were in his mind when he said these words about Jesus. I am going to draw your attention briefly to some Biblical Lambs.

First of all, he may well have had in mind the Passover Lamb – and on Good Friday that must be foremost in our minds. You will remember that it was the blood of a lamb daubed on the posts and lintels of the doors which protected the Israelites in Egypt, during the last of the plagues. The lamb's blood delivered them from destruction, and so they were able to leave Egypt and be free. So although the Paschal Lamb - the Passover Lamb was not to take away sin, it did bring about the deliverance from death - and maybe John is saying 'Here is the man who is to be sacrificed so that you can be delivered from death.' That would be fair comment - there is a deliverance from death that Jesus has won for us. Paul also used this title to refer to Jesus in this way - he says "Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed for us."

But there was also the lamb sacrificed day after day in the temple ritual. John, who was the son of a priest, would know all about that - the daily sacrifice for the sins of the people - the burnt offering. Maybe John is saying "You know that night and morning a lamb is sacrificed in the temple - but here is the man whose sacrifice will take away the sins of the whole world." In the Day of Atonement ritual, which we might think of particularly today, the animal sacrificed before the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies was a bull, not a lamb – but a lamb was sacrificed as well.

There are still more lambs that he might have had in mind. In Isaiah 55, in one of the songs about the Suffering Servant of the Lord, he is described like this:

The Lord burdened him with the sins of all of us  
Harshly dealt with, he bore it humbly, he never opened his mouth,  
Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter-house.

The words were written about God's deliverer of his people. From the first days of the Christian faith, people associated those words of Isaiah with Jesus – that he was the suffering servant of the Lord, the one who died humbly to redeem God's people. Certainly this was the way Christians used the word very early on. Maybe here John is saying "This is the suffering servant of the Lord we have all been waiting for." That would tie in with this ambiguous word in Aramaic I referred to earlier.

And there is yet one more Lamb - one use of the animal that sounds very strange to us, but was familiar to the Jews of the time. For us the lamb is a weak and woolly animal, hardly a majestic creature. But in the writings of the Maccabees, just before the time of Jesus, the lamb - especially a horned lamb - is a symbol of a great conqueror. Judas Maccabeus, the leader of the Maccabean revolt was described like that - so were Samuel and David and Solomon. So there was in the title Lamb of God, the element of the conquering champion, the man of majesty and power, and not the picture of helpless and gentle weakness that we might have in our minds.

In the book of Revelation, another John says that in his vision he saw before God's throne a Lamb that seemed to have been sacrificed, which had seven horns. And speaking of Jesus, he uses the title Lamb almost fifty times in that book. It sums up, for him, the suffering, sacrifice, and triumph of Jesus.

So whatever John had in his mind - any or indeed all of these things could have been there. It is still a good shorthand word for us - even though we need to have its meaning explained a bit these days. John is saying to his hearers and to us - "I thought I knew this man who is Jesus. But now I see that he is God's anointed one, the one we expect to come and deliver us. He has come to suffer for us, and to deal with our sins once and for all, so that they need no longer drag us down. He will take them right away. He comes in humility, but is truly the conqueror, the deliverer from our slavery to sin. He comes to win us our freedom." All that is implied as John says - Look, there is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world"

John had known Jesus for a long time before he saw that he was all this. A similar thing will be true for us. We will have heard of Jesus for a long time before we find ourselves seeing who he really is. When John saw the truth about Jesus- he told the world – Look - here is the Lamb. So should we. As we have seen Jesus, so we are to help others to see him too. That is our commission. We are to be the people who point out the truth about Jesus to others, just as John did. We are to echo Charles Wesley's words, written in 1749

O that the world might taste and see the riches of his grace;  
The arms of love that compass me would all mankind embrace  
His only righteousness I show, his saving grace proclaim  
'Tis all my business here below to cry "Behold the Lamb"  
Happy if with my latest breath I may but gasp his name;  
Preach him to all and cry in death; Behold, Behold the Lamb"

So Katherine Tynan was right in the way the lambs on the hills led her thoughts to another hill, with three crosses on it. As we listen now to some music let's reflect on Christ's sacrifice – the servant, the lamb, who suffered and died for each one of us, the idea we heard in or reading from Isaiah. Let's look back to the story of the Passover Lamb and the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and think of what Jesus has delivered us from. And let's look forward to that imagery of the triumphal lamb in the book of Revelation, and rejoice that, quoting Chapter 5, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.'