

Sunday 25 April 2010: Fourth Sunday of Easter

The Lamb

Readings: Revelation 7.9-21; John 10.22-30

I suspect that St Martins might include quite a lot of people who feel quite resistant to being told to behave like sheep. An independent, enquiring, non-conformist lot in many ways. Well, fear not. The juxtaposition of the most extraordinary picture of a slain lamb who becomes the shepherd from Revelation with that of the Good Shepherd, must subvert whatever comfortable pastoral notions we might have in mind.

But let's begin with the picture of the sheep and shepherd which Jesus gave his followers. Like the good Jew he was, he was in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Hanukah, which marked the reconsecration of the temple after its retrieval, against all the odds and huge armies from the realm of Antiochus, who had seized it from them and oppressed them. A feast of deliverance, a feast of messianic hope. It took place in Solomon's Portico – an ancient and renewed portico with many columns – Corinthian capitals I believe, just like the ones on our portico. Here's something we can identify with. And on the day of our APCM, where the first point is 'The pillars of St Martins' and begins with the liturgy and preaching of the church, it helps us to distinguish the metaphor from the reality. It is right here, in the midst of this festival, where one of the noises amongst the many people must have been the anxious bleating of the lambs which had been brought to sacrifice that Jesus says these words.

'My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.'

He says it under cross examination from 'the Jews'. He says it after his discourse on being the Good Shepherd, and he says it in response to their direct question about whether he's the Messiah. He doesn't want to say a direct yes to that question, because he knows they will misunderstand what kind of leadership he is going to give and think of military conquest. But he does remind them he is the good shepherd. And while David was a shepherd, and they are deep in the Hebrew tradition, there is also something very edgy about the choice.

The presence of sacrificial lambs means that no-one at the festival can forget the categories of what in the Jewish system counts as clean and unclean, holy and unholy. The lifeblood of perfect lambs, when sacrificed, makes an atoning sacrifice for the unholiness of the people – mediated by the priests in the temple. But the same blood which in that context is a detergent is also, out in the fields, a pollutant. It's why the priests are needed, to be very careful with the blood. Shepherds therefore, are unclean. So when Jesus says 'I am the good shepherd' earlier its dynamic equivalent for us might be something like 'I am the good migrant worker.' It's a bit like 'the good Samaritan' to their ears. It's not the kind of line you'd think of using in an election.

So already we know that it's a radical voice followers of Jesus are learning to recognise – a voice which may not always, or often for that matter, be acceptable to the authorities and religious institutions of the day. And the fact that these words happen in the context of this festival reminds us, if we didn't know it already, that the pillars of our church which matter most are the hearing of the good Shepherd's voice, not the ones we walk through to hear that voice. Though if they become reminders and symbols of what we're here for, then they're doing their job very well.

Clearly never perishing isn't promising us that we will avoid death. But Jesus does promise that we won't be defeated by it, and we will find through him a portal to life, in all its fullness. And he goes on to make the amazing claim 'I and the Father are one' which I won't dwell on now, except by taking us on to Revelation's vision of the lamb on the throne.

I went down to a family funeral in Cornwall this week. My aunt who had died and her husband had gone there, many years ago, to be farmers. One of Bar's many accomplishments was organising the lambing shed – so she was unsentimental and realistic about sheep. It was a beautiful day, and a hopeful service – it contained 'for unto us a Son is born.' Handel, there's a man who understood the tenor of the connections between sheep, lambs and the Messiah. In the train on the way back it felt like a portal, to a sunlit pastoral land like that I instinctively feel belongs to Psalm 23 – the psalm we go to when we need to experience the reality that no-one can snatch us from the Father's hand. I'd wanted to bring these words from Revelation into the prayers. There are few of us who can't admit to being sheeply enough to need to know that

'the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

Here is a post-resurrection picture which tears through the veil into the scenes of heaven to bring us the picture of the lamb who has been slain, now enthroned in glory. The vision takes us through a portal to get a glimpse of the fullness of eternal life – we are taken into another dimension – as in their own way the lighting of the paschal candle and the ringing of the bells on Easter day took us into that dimension. The struggle is to remember we can stay there.

This tearing through the veil comes between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals – with all the tribulation and judgement they are unleashing. As well as the tribes of Israel we have people from every tribe and language, the noble army of martyrs, those who have been persecuted for their faith. It puts not being allowed to wear a cross in perspective, but also reminds us that we are never that far away in our world from a situation when we can be persecuted for our faith. It reminds us that God's judgement on the world will come, a righting of wrongs and overthrowing of all sorts of unholy powers.

But what has happened to the lamb? This lamb has transformed from the ones which would have been bleating anxiously on Solomon's portico at the festival of Hanukah. They were the lambs who were sacrificed – amnos – but the word which John the author of Revelation uses is arnion. This lamb is also a warrior, and a victor. This is the lamb that was slain.

The palms people clothed in white wave remind us of Palm Sunday and of the feast of Tabernacles – another festival connected with awaiting the coming of the Messiah. This was the feast taking place when Jesus was born – that's why the shepherds were out in the fields with their flocks. Interesting that the angels made a bee-line for them to take them to the promised one.

Another phrase some of us might be resistant to is 'washed in the blood of the lamb.' Well think again. We've already heard about how the blood of the lamb can become purifying. So Jesus, the lamb that was slain, has become the lamb through whom the saints may be purified. To be washed in the blood of the lamb is to have our robes red whether through death, through martyrdom or our own sins, made a dazzling white – like the robes presented in John's vision. It is to know the cleansing and forgiving power of Jesus. If we don't like that background, we have to remember that's what we're saying goodbye to. The word used for

salvation is here best translated victory – backed up by the victor’s palms carried by the saints, and that victorious lamb. We all get to be in the choir, we are all priests in white robes, as the need for priests who can carry around the blood of lambs without contamination is gone – no more need for animal sacrifices.

Can we imagine what it would look like to be in the lamb’s temple – with room for this great multitude – and with the lamb on the throne. Perhaps after a Lent of gazing at the Rublev icon of the Trinity where the lamb is in the chalice we can learn to imagine the lamb in the host at the centre of our east window – and understand how the lion and the unicorn from the royal coat of arms will be getting out of their heraldic poses and bowing down.

Can we begin to understand what it means to follow this lamb, who taken all our fears, vulnerabilities and sins, has lived them and died them and given each of us a way of taking our authority from his throne to live our lives in the world with his transforming love and power?

The Volcano Ash reminded me of the joke: ‘How do you make God smile – tell Him your plans.’ But here we’ve been given a vision of how on earth we can live our mission, and helps us to recognise the voice which will guide us through all the trials and tribulations we will meet along the way.

The Good Shepherd knows how to communicate with sheep and lambs. He has after all been one himself – he knows how vulnerable it feels to be a lamb. Remember this is the lamb who becomes the shepherd. This is the Lamb Blake is speaking of in the poem which John Tavener has set so hauntingly to music.

‘Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?’

Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee,
Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee.
He is called by thy name,
For He calls Himself a Lamb.’