

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Lamb of God

Today we read the story of John the Baptist's greeting of Jesus as it is told by the Fourth Gospel. What can we learn from this tradition? First, that the Fourth Evangelist absolutely avoids describing the Baptism of Jesus by John; this writer is so concerned to stress Jesus' divine dignity that he could not bring himself to include a picture of a human being pouring water on him in a rite of cleansing. Rather he stresses that the Baptist, who has come *to bear witness to the Light*, fulfils his vocation at the moment when Jesus arrives at the place of Baptism. There is no trace here of the Lukan tradition that John was Jesus' cousin; indeed, he claims not to have known Jesus in any earthly context, but only by a moment of revelation; and he knew him in that moment as *the one who is going to baptize with the Holy Spirit*.

What could "Lamb of God" mean?

The word *lamb* in Scripture most often occurs in the context of *sacrifice*; the first murderer, Cain, offered vegetables to God as the first sacrifice in the Bible: Abel the Just offered a lamb as his first sacrifice, and *God looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but not on Cain and his offering*. Abraham's son Isaac asks: *Where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?* Abraham answers firmly: *My son, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt-offering*. No-one knew better than Abraham that Isaac - who was intended as the sacrifice - was indeed *provided by God*, being the son God had promised him. This, if I am not mistaken, is the great origin of the phrase *Lamb of God*.

A Sacrifice Wholly Consumed

A burnt-offering, or holocaust, is the most total sacrifice. It is not like a communion-sacrifice, where the animal was *cooked* to be shared out - like the Passover lamb. Rather it is an animal - always the most perfect specimen ("No bone of his must be broken"), which is totally written-off, given up to God. If John was saying this about Jesus, then we have a clue to what was in his mind. John had a burning eye for moral and spiritual holiness. It brought him to grief, because it revealed to him the motives of the sinful as well: he denounced Sadducees and Pharisees, published the sins of the tetrarch Herod; having made so many enemies, his fate was sealed. Small wonder that this prophetic man, in his ardent, urgent purity, should look into the eyes of Jesus of Nazareth with such insight. He knew he had met,

first, a kindred spirit; here was the same forthright nature and prophetic inspiration which had driven John out into the wilderness. He also knew he had met his Master (*I am not worthy to loosen his sandal*) and that the One who stood before him had a vocation from their God far above his own calling (*I saw the Spirit from heaven come down like a dove and rest on him*). But nowhere is John so deeply inspired as when he calls Jesus *Lamb of God*.

Sent by the Father to be a sacrifice

I think that John could already read in the eyes of Jesus the mysterious plan of the Cross. John knew about martyrdom, about the blood of the prophets that is shed when the People of God refuse those who are sent to them; I reckon he must have known by this time that he himself was unlikely to die in bed. But I think that in the eyes of Jesus he read a total belonging to God which drew no line at death, which would not turn to right or to left in the following of the will of God. I am sure he saw a totally confirmed plan to carry to the end the law of obedience which all the others - Pharisees, Priests, Kings, Tetrarchs, and all - had compromised. That is what the religious purity of Christ was like, and I am sure John saw it, and trembled, and said: *He must grow greater, and I must grow less*. Let us set ourselves to know him like John, and to bear witness like him to Jesus, the Light of the Nations!

Fr Philip