

## **The Sunday Next Before Advent 2020**

“Behold the Lamb of God!” (St. John 1.35)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Here we are at the last Sunday of the Church Year: the Sunday Next Before Advent. And listen to how it ends – the Gospel chosen for today, the one that has been read for hundreds and hundreds of years by people all over the world, says simply, “Behold the Lamb of God”. Of all the things that Jesus said and of the miracles He did, this Gospel is the one which closes out the Trinity Season and leads us into Advent. Why? What is its meaning?

Well, to call the Lord Jesus ‘the Lamb of God’ is to emphasize His Sacrifice on the Cross and the shedding of His precious Blood for us. A lamb in those days, in the Middle East, was a sacrificial animal; so, to say, ‘Behold the Lamb of God’ is like saying, “See – look upon the One Who has been sent from (owned, or provided by) God,” for sacrifice.

Last year, we visited the Connors’ farm off the Homestead Road to see some sheep. Just after Easter, the year before, we had borrowed two of the lambs – do you remember that? They came with diapers! They were very friendly and we did not have to be afraid of them. That’s the thing: sheep do not have many defences. They are smart and they have good memories, but they are vulnerable to all kinds of predators. And so the Lord Jesus – the Lamb of God – emptied Himself and opened Himself to the scorn and jealousy and mocking and injustice and torture of humans. He did not fight back when He was falsely accused and arrested. He did not avoid the humiliation and suffering of the Cross; instead, He came down from Heaven for the purpose of shedding His Blood and offering Himself as the Lamb of God – the perfect Sacrifice -- for us.

The sand dollar is flat-looking sea urchin. It lives on the floor of shallow sandy waters along the coasts of ocean waters in the Northern Hemisphere. When it is washed up on the beach and bleached by the sun, it looks like a large silver coin – hence its name.

Interestingly, in spite of its unassuming appearance, this creature tells the story of this morning's Gospel. In the center, of the top of the sand dollar's shell you can clearly see a star, which represents the Star of Bethlehem that led the Wise Men to the manger when Christ was born. Around it is the outline of the Easter lily, a sign of Our Lord's Resurrection.

Also at the edges of the star are four holes, and in the center another one. These remind us of the four Sacred Wounds of Our Lord on His Hands and Feet that He bore after being nailed to the Cross. The center hole, the fifth, represents the pierce Wound to Jesus' Side.

If you turn the sand dollar over, you will find an outline of the Poinsetta, the Christmas flower. Finally, if you break open the sand dollar, five "doves" emerge – the sections of the sand dollars' 'jaws', which remind us of the Gospel of Peace.

All of what can be seen in and on the sand dollar wonderfully testifies to John the Baptist's Word this morning about the Lord Jesus: "Behold the Lamb of God". Here is the Sacrificial Lamb provided by God Himself. Humbly and quietly He came into this world, born of the Virgin Mary at Bethlehem; and humbly and quietly, like a lamb led to the slaughter, Jesus was nailed to the Cross to take away the sins of the world.

As we reflect upon this, it is important to think about the next part of today's Gospel. Two of John the Baptist's disciples heard him say, 'Behold the Lamb of God', and they followed Jesus. Knowing they were behind Him, Jesus turned and asked, "What seek ye?" or "What are you seeking?" He did not ask "Who" – "Who are you looking for?". He asked them "What – what are you looking for?"

William Barclay, a Bible Scholar and Minister of the Church of Scotland, highlights this question. He asks, "Were they legalists, looking only for conversations about the little details of the Law, like the Scribes and Pharisees? Were they nationalists looking for a military commander who would smash the occupying power of Rome? Were they humble men of prayer looking for God and for His will? Or were they simply puzzled...looking for light on the road of life?" Barclay goes on to suggest that "It would be well if every now and again we were to ask ourselves, 'What am I looking for? What is my aim and goal? What am I really trying to get out of life?'"

One thing that people want today is truth -- the real McCoy – the genuine article. Not a buttered up representation. Not a fake, propped up representation, but that which is authentic. What are you seeking? Truth. Authenticity. The real thing.

Interestingly, as Barclay points out, the answer Jesus gave to John's disciples was, "Come and see". Apparently this was the kind of response often used in that culture by the Jewish Rabbi. "Do you want to know the answer to this question?" ... "Come and see and we will think about it together." Therefore, when Jesus said, "Come and see," He was inviting them not only to come and talk, but to come and discover the things that He alone could show them – things that involved His servant ministry, and His purpose, as the Lamb of God.

So, on this last Sunday of the Church Year, the message is a restating of what we have already covered: Christ, the Son of God, has come humbly and lowly as the Lamb of God. He emptied Himself of all glory and became one of us in order to confront and defeat our enemy of sin and death and hell. Today's Gospel tells us this now because next week we will begin to read and think about Christ's promised return – when He shall come with power and great glory as our King and Judge. The first time, He came as the Lamb of God to be our Saviour; the Second time He will come like a lion to be our King.

That leads me to this last thought – what does this mean for us today? Quite clearly, it is saying that in order to be a follower of Christ, we must be prepared for humiliation and for suffering. A lamb is practically defenceless – it is not a ferocious animal. Please do not misunderstand what I am saying: I am NOT suggesting that we compromise what we believe; I am simply pointing out that the very Son of God willingly laid down His life. He did that – He, the Incarnate Son of God, did that for us, the sinful creature.

For us -- the followers of Jesus; the children of God – for us this has some key points. The imitation of Christ will require humility, service and sacrifice. It will require, as we see in the life of our Saviour, the rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. It will require much prayer and fasting as we try to discern what is worth going to the wall over? What battles will be glorifying to God and which ones will be a waste of time? Thomas A Kempis said this: "Everyone, it is true, wishes to do as he pleases and is attracted to those who agree with him. But if

God be among us, we must at times give up our opinions for the blessings of peace”.

You see, although we have the promise of Christ’s return as our King, He has not returned yet. When He does come again, He will set everything to rights according to God’s perfect plan; in the meantime, we are left to imitate His way of the Cross. Our relationship with the Lord – and His adoption of us in Baptism -- gives us a unique status, as the children of God. However, it does not mean, that we will prosper in anything and everything we want to accomplish; nor does it mean that we can ignore the legal demands that are placed upon us. Still, we must render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.

The pandemic has given the Church a powerful opportunity to witness to the new life – the new life won for us by Christ’s suffering. By the power of the Holy Spirit we can make the required sacrifices, trusting that our King and Saviour is drawing near. He has promised to return and so He will – not quietly and not humbly, but with power and great glory.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...