

Sermon: Here is the Lamb of God

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Back in my student days, as a seminarian studying towards a Master of Divinity degree at Knox College, Toronto. I was part of the Mission & Theology (M&T) Society, the equivalent to a student council. At one time, I was put in charge of organizing a formal debate, involving students from across various theological colleges at the University of Toronto campus.

In order to promote this event, I had invited Madam Lois Wilson as a distinguished guest and the honorary judge. Madam Wilson had served as the Moderator of the United Church of Canada, from 1980 to 1982. In fact, she was the first female moderator of that denomination. She was also a Companion of the Order of Canada, and a former senator, who was appointed by Jean Chretien to the upper chamber in 1998. To a wide-eye, young seminary student like myself, Madam Wilson was truly an accomplished and distinguished feminist theologian, worthy of admiration and respect.

To this day, I still remember how I fumbled at introducing her, at the event's opening. You see, I had gotten used to calling her Madam Wilson in our prior communication in preparation for the event. That was how I introduced her—as 'Madam Wilson', after reading out her impressive credentials. Boy, was I schooled by her. She reminded me, publicly, and insisted that I re-introduce her properly by her honorary titles, that is 'The Most Reverend, the Honourable Madam Lois Wilson', befitting her position as the former moderator and senator.

I've always remembered that incident, and have come to realize how important it is to introduce someone properly at a public function, and would never again neglect that basic duty and courtesy. With that being said, I wonder how one should introduce Jesus at a public setting? I wonder how Jesus would like to be introduced? What honorary title would be suitable, what courtesy would be fitting for Jesus, the one only begotten Son of the Most High?

Our Gospel reading today, in John 1:29-42, contains an episode of Jesus being introduced by John the Baptist. To be sure, John the disciple, the author of the Gospel had already introduce Jesus extensively, previously. At the opening verses of the book, Jesus was introduced as the

'Word', or *logos* in Greek. This 'Word' of God, as in capital 'W', not in lower case, but the living 'Word', upper case. This Word was with God in the beginning, this Word was God. All things were created through Him, and nothing came into being without Him. The Word became flesh, and pitched a tent among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. Now that was quite an introduction, wasn't it?

As if that wasn't enough, John the Baptist also chimed in with his own version. When pushed by priests and Levites from Jerusalem, as to who he was, John clarified that he was not the Messiah. He was the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, making straight the way of the Lord, preparing the path for the one who is to come. Comparatively distinct from the other three earlier gospel accounts, John the baptizer in the Gospel of John was not recorded to have baptized Jesus. He talked about baptizing the one who is to come, he talked about not being worthy to untie the strap of his saddle, but the act of baptizing Jesus was not actually recounted in the Gospel of John. Instead, we the readers are given in verse 29, is this over-the-top introduction of Jesus. As John the baptizer saw Jesus, seemingly for the first time, or at least for the first time in a public setting, coming toward him, John declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!". What an introduction!

Now, there is no reason to believe this was the first ever meeting between John the baptizer and Jesus—there were cousins, after all. Their mothers, that is Elizebeth and Mary had met and blessed each other previously, while carrying them in their respective wombs. For all we know, John and Jesus might have played with each other as toddlers, grew up together as close kins in a village setting. But these kinds of details were not important to gospel writers. To John the disciple, the author of the Gospel of John, what was important is how Jesus was introduced to the world in a public setting. So John the Baptist declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" He did it not once, but twice, in this opening chapter of the gospel.

What does it mean, to be the Lamb of God? What was (is) its theological significance? According to the Torah, or the Law in Judaism, the only way to approach the Mighty, the Righteous, the Holy God of Israel is through proper temple sacrifices. Leviticus 1-7 details the various types of sacrifices—both animal and non-animal. Sheep, as well as cattle, goats, doves, and pigeons were regularly slaughtered. Wheat, barley, olive oil,

wine and frankincense were also offered up, mostly as burned sacrifices to the Lord God.

For those of us, modern worshippers who have long done away with animal sacrifices, it is hard for us to imagine what it was like. We read about descriptions, such as ‘pleasing aroma to the Lord’, and we think about a good backyard BBQ. What is mostly forgotten, is the incredibly bloody affair of slaughtering bounded animals, draining their blood, cutting off various body parts, and disposing of carcasses. In fact, there is an area right outside of the city of Jerusalem, called the Valley of Hinnom, that was used as the place of disposal of dead animals. At the height of temple sacrifices, that area was so bloody, deplorable, inhospitable, and so despicable that it was also called ‘Gehenna’, as a place of burning hell where the wicked are sent to as their eternal punishment.

Within such a sacrificial framework, lambs as young sheep, were known for their distinctive characteristics as pure and innocent, and appreciated for their gentleness and dependence.

In Isaiah 40:11, God as shepherd gathers lambs in his arms because they are helpless. In Nathan’s parable of David’s greed, it is the lamb that stands for helpless innocence. In the eschatological vision of Isaiah, it is the lamb that will feed and lie down with the wolf. When Prophet Jeremiah wishes to paint a picture of heightened helplessness and innocence, he chooses the lambs being led to the slaughter. The Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53:7, is also like a lamb led to the slaughter without uttering a sound. Even when Jesus paints a picture of the vulnerability of his disciples, he uses the image of sending them out as lambs into the midst of wolves (Luke 10:3).

Therefore, the person of Jesus as Lamb of God, being introduced as the Lamb of God, captures all that theological characteristics. Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed, is pure, without blemish. He is innocent of all sinfulness. He is dependent wholly on his father in heaven. He submits fully to God’s will, in all aspects of his life. Even at this early stage, we could already see where this self-induced helpless life is heading towards—towards the slaughter at the cross.

This is where the author of the Book of Hebrews becomes helpful. In Hebrews chapter 9-10, the author explains that Jesus was both the high priest and the sacrificial lamb. Therefore, the sacrifice of Jesus, unlike previous sacrifices, was once and for all given, there being no need for

further ones. The blood of Christ that was shed on the cross was needed for the forgiveness of sins, the only thing needed from that point on.

In so doing, Christ fulfills the role as the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. Christ fulfills the role as the scapegoat in Leviticus. Christ fulfills the role as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In time, as revealed in the Book of Revelation, Christ shall fulfill the role as the triumphant Lamb of God who overcomes all power of death and chaos, and ushers in the New Heaven and the New Earth. Hallelujah! Amen!

Again, John the Baptist introduced Jesus the second time as the Lamb of God. This time, two of disciples of John heard, saw and followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” Indeed, what are we all looking for? Are we looking for relief from our daily grind? Are we looking for a deeper purpose to our lives? Are we perhaps looking for explanations for what ill us, what troubles the world? Or are we perhaps looking for hope in all the wrong places?

In response to such a deep and existential question of “What are you looking for?”, the two disciples of John replied, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” I don’t know about you, but I get incredibly frustrated by these two. It is like asking for a cup of water and two morsels of bread, from the one who is the source of living water, the one who is the living bread. They are like beggars who do not know how to be choosers. But at least, they are asking from the right person. They are asking from the one who was in the beginning, the one who will be at the end—the one who was, who is, who is to come.

From Jesus, in face of that simple question of “Where are you staying?”, comes the most endearing invitation: “Come and see!” Come and see where Jesus is staying, but come and see also what he is doing, what he is teaching, and where he is going. I assure you, your life will never be the same.

I don’t think Jesus cares at all how he was introduced. He knows who he is, he knows what he does, and he cares only that we follow...come and see!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.