

## SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

*Gospel: John 1:29-34*

John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." John also testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

### REFLECTION 1:

### LAMB OF GOD

In 1994, rock star Rod Stewart drew a world-record crowd of 3.5 million people to a concert on Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro. When Jesus entered the small town of Bethany he was still unknown and no one came to see him. John the Baptist had to point him out to others, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'. Jesus' fame would spread and 2,000 years later, huge crowds of 3.2 million would come to see his Vicar on Earth, Pope Francis, and receive his blessing on World Youth Day at the same venue.

In today's Gospel, John the Baptist skillfully turned the attention of those sent from Jerusalem to enquire about him. 'There stands among you one unknown to you', John replied, explaining that he was only a voice for the one who was coming after him, the Word Made Flesh - the Lamb of God. According to Jewish tradition the Messiah had to remain hidden until Elijah had anointed him and made him known publicly to Israel. Jesus later explained that this actually transpired, Elijah came in the person of John the Baptist. Before baptizing his cousin John was unaware that Jesus was in fact the Messiah. However, he had been given a sign that he would actually see the Spirit come down and rest on Jesus at the Jordan. Then, in the light of the scriptures, he had sensed that he was indeed the Lamb of future atonement, the Servant chosen by God to baptize in the Spirit. 'He is the Son of God' (John 1: 29-34).

From the outset in its presentation of Jesus, the fourth Gospel (St. John's) heralds the baptism of death which Jesus must undergo to take away the sins of the world - the fire Jesus had come to kindle on earth (Luke 12: 45-50). This fire Jesus was to bring was truly the fire of love. Pope Francis insists that the only force that can transform us more deeply into one is the force of love. He would also add that nothing weakens us more than love. When we totally give ourselves to others, we destroy all our defences and open ourselves to whatever others can do to us - good or bad. At the same time it leads us to experience the uniqueness of those others and ourselves and create a bond of oneness that cannot be achieved in any other way. He would say, quoting his Jesuit friend Teilhard de Chardin, 'Some day after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then for a second time, we will have discovered fire'.

There are two ways of simplifying our thinking of Jesus Christ. We can either raise Jesus to the highest heaven and proclaim him God, but a God who cannot be reached and whose salvation remains limited to life beyond in eternity. Or we can bring Jesus down to earth and see in him more than a man among men, more as a brother, the Emmanuel God with us. Jesus Christ can neither be bound to earth nor confined to heaven. Whatever our state, we must place Jesus between God and ourselves.

## REFLECTION 2:

## FROM CRIB TO CROSS

It is estimated that at the time of Jesus, ninety per cent of the economy of Palestine/Israel/Holy Land was involved in the breeding, rearing and provisioning of livestock for sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem. So, to be a temple priest in early first century Jerusalem was to be a butcher! For instance, on one Passover day alone, records show that 256,500 lambs were slain. Since blood is the symbol of life and all life belongs to God, the blood of these lambs was poured out by the priest on the temple altar. Ancient worship was a serious deadly affair. That is why Jesus, when entering the temple in Jerusalem, made a whip of cord and turning over the tables of the sellers of livestock for sacrifice drove them out saying, that his Father's house was a house of prayer but that they, the merchants, had made it into a den of thieves. What Jesus was really telling us through this episode was; 'Stop it! Stop it! What I want is mercy not sacrifice'. All too soon, Jesus was to be that solitary Lamb, which would be suspended in sacrifice for humanity on an infamous gibbet.

Sure enough the temple was destroyed by the Romans under Titus in 70 AD - the end of animal sacrifice had arrived. The temple was never rebuilt; all that remained was one solid wall where the Roman Emperor decreed, that the Jews could bewail their loss.

According to the Gospel of John (John 1: 29-34) the public ministry of Jesus begins and ends with the image of a lamb. When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming towards him, he shouted, 'Look on the Lamb of God'. But why a lamb? It seems such a soft symbol. But a lamb would have signified the image of sacrifice to that Jewish audience. Lambs were sacrificed in the temple as expiation for sins and the reference here is most probably to that special Lamb of Passover.

When Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go from Egypt, the Lord sent a series of plagues: frogs, mosquitoes, boils, locusts, and darkness. Pharaoh was adamant. So God sent the worst plague of all - he killed every first born of human and animal in Egypt. Only the Jewish children were spared, because God had forewarned them to sprinkle blood of a sacrificed lamb on their door frames.

At the end of the Gospel, John the Evangelist tells us that Jesus was crucified on the day of preparation for the Passover: the day when the lambs were slaughtered in the temple. While all this was going on the real Lamb of God was being slain on Calvary - the one saving sacrifice took place beyond the temple boundary.

Just as the Jews were saved by the Passover animal, so are we saved by the human Lamb of God. Sin is a toxin in humanity's body that we have power to unleash but no power to control. Jesus absorbs these diseased cells into his own body and so makes humanity's body wholesome.