

Behold The Lamb of God

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 2nd of January 2000.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Behold the Lamb of God and is from John chapter 1 verses 19 to 34.

O God, we pray that you will teach us from your word that we may be followers of Jesus Christ. We ask this for his sake. Amen. It's many years since I watched the program Sail of the Century, but when I was a teenager I used to watch it and my favourite questions were when Tony Barber would begin by saying, who am I?

And then he would list a series of clues and always the goal was to try and get the right answer before one of the contestants did. Who am I? I was born in such and such a year, at such and such a place, and I went to this school and that school.

Generally the clues were fairly vague and broad and then became of course more and more specific as the question went on.

[1 : 31] There's a sense in which these verses in John chapter 1 are a little bit like that. It begins with some people asking John the Baptist, who are you? And then the series of interviews sort of vaguely narrows it down, although the answers are fairly negative rather than positive.

A group had been sent from Jerusalem, a group of priests and Levites, who were also a priestly tribe, sent by the rulers of Jerusalem and the Pharisees, we're told, to John the Baptist.

And that's their first question in verse 19, who are you? But as we'll see in this passage, it's the wrong question. It's the wrong question because John the Baptist never answers it.

But it's the wrong question because they're concerned with the wrong person. The issue really is not who are you, John the Baptist, but who is the one who is coming that you are pointing towards. And through this passage and the rest of the chapter which I'm preaching on tonight, the focus moves from who are you, John the Baptist, to who is this one to come?

[2 : 49] Who is the Messiah? Who is the Son of God? Who is the Lamb of God? Who is the King of Israel? That's the movement in this second half of John chapter 1.

You may like to have it open in front of you, page 862 in the Bibles. And from this week really until Easter, morning and night, where we'll be looking at John's Gospel.

And the sermons will be through these chapters. John the Baptist, it seems, had created some sort of stir or controversy, a bit of public interest.

He was baptizing people in the River Jordan. We're told in verse 28 here that it was in Bethany across the Jordan. Nobody knows exactly where that Bethany was, but it's probably down the road from Jerusalem and across the River Jordan from Jericho in the modern country of Jordan.

So it's on the far side of the Jordan River from the perspective of Jerusalem. And in John the Baptist's day, baptisms were not completely unknown. They were probably not all that common either.

[3 : 58] But any non-Jew, a Gentile, who wanted to become a Jew would in John's day, apart from being circumcised, also be baptized. And some Jews would baptize themselves, although probably not the word baptism was used.

They would have a ritual bath, where they would walk down in what was called a mikveh bath and submerge themselves underwater as a way of ritual cleansing before a special ceremony or sacrifice or service.

What was unusual about John was that he was baptizing Jews because the Jews who would have a ritual bath would administer the baptism themselves.

It would be a self-baptism. But John was baptizing Jewish people. And that was unusual. And that was creating some sort of stir or controversy.

And that is what led to the Jerusalem leaders, religious leaders, sending a delegation to find out what's going on, who are you, and why are you doing what you're doing?

[5 : 09] John's response to the question, who are you, does not really answer the question. His response in verse 20 is, I am not the Messiah.

Now that doesn't actually help a lot in answering the question, who are you? Because I could ask each and every one of you, who are you? And you could say, I am not the Messiah. And it doesn't actually help me know who you are.

And none of you are the Messiah, I think. But John's response, even though he doesn't say who he is, by saying, I am not the Messiah, is actually getting to the heart of why they're asking him the question.

Because in the first century AD in Palestine, there was quite an intense messianic expectation. The reason why it had developed to such a pitch at that period seems to have been the Roman occupation of Judea.

Because the Romans were occupying and controlling the place, including Jerusalem, there was a growing sense that things were coming to a head in Israel's history and the Messiah must surely come soon.

[6 : 30] And we know from other writings of the time, not in the Bible, that there were a number of people who claimed to be the Messiah at the time. And there were certainly lots of groups of people who looked for the Messiah.

Some anticipated a peaceful person. Some anticipated a political person. Some anticipated a military person who would come with a sword and basically kill lots of people and bring about God's kingdom.

Some anticipated a mystic, monk-type person. There was a whole variety, a whole gamut of expectations of a Messiah who would come. And various groups in competition and opposition to each other, it seems, about what sort of Messiah would come and how you could provoke the Messiah to come.

Literally, the word Messiah just means anointed one. Somebody would be anointed with oil to take up public office. In the Old Testament, the king was anointed.

Occasionally, the priest was anointed. The high priest it was, and Aaron was. And very occasionally, a prophet was anointed. But by and large, it was the king.

[7 : 45] John's response, though he doesn't answer the question, is also a very deliberate response. Notice what verse 20 says. He confessed, and did not deny it, but confessed, I am not the Messiah.

That seems to be saying he's making quite a point of this. He's laboring the point. He's being very deliberate here in saying, I am not the Messiah.

It's not just a casual, offhanded, or flippant, or comical response. It's very deliberate. But also, the emphasis in his response is important to get right.

John is not saying, I'm not the Messiah. John is saying, I am not the Messiah.

And there is a difference. The emphasis is on, I am not the Messiah. And the implication that's left unsaid is, but there is a Messiah round about.

[8 : 50] John's words are implying, or an implicit pointing towards the Messiah. He's not saying, I'm not the Messiah, and leaving it at that.

I am not the Messiah, but unsaid is the fact that there is a Messiah. He's a round about. He's about to be revealed. John, from the beginning, is pointing away from himself to the Messiah.

But to this point, of course, these Jewish leaders do not know about whom he is speaking. Well, the delegation continues with its interview.

It's a bit like 20 questions, but it's not really a game. Well, if you're not the Messiah then, are you Elijah? And we might think that's an odd next jump in questions.

If you're not the Messiah, why Elijah? Why not say Moses or David or something else? But there was quite an expectation that Elijah would return either as the Messiah or as a forerunner for the Messiah.

[9 : 57] The reason for that expectation is, there are a couple of reasons, I guess. The end of the Old Testament as we have it finishes with a book called Malachi. and in the last chapter of the last book of our Old Testament is the expectation that Elijah will one day return and that would herald in the final age of God's kingdom.

The expectation of Elijah's return is also associated with the fact that unusually he did not die. Elijah, when he finished his earthly life, was taken up to heaven in chariots of fire. Because he didn't die, there was the expectation then that he's still alive and would return. But there are a couple of other reasons why John the Baptist was asked, are you Elijah? Firstly, he's wearing similar sorts of clothes to Elijah. He's wearing camel hair and a leather belt around his waist and Elijah, we were told, was also similarly clothed. But not only that, John the Baptist is baptizing in the very area where Elijah was taken up to heaven. Elijah crossed the Jordan and there was taken up to heaven and here is John the Baptist across the Jordan baptizing.

[11 : 21] So it seems that a lot of people were thinking, well is this Elijah returned? If he's not the Messiah, is he then the forerunner for the Messiah who is announcing him to come?

Now we may well think that John the Baptist ought to reply to this question, yes I am. Jesus identifies John the Baptist with Elijah in Matthew's Gospel. But John just says, I am not. I don't think he's lying. I think probably he didn't fully understand his own role in pointing to the Messiah. Jesus would understand that perfectly.

the delegation continues with a third question then. At the end of verse 21, are you the prophet? Who is the prophet?

The prophet was again an expected figure from the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 18, Moses in giving the law says that there will be one like him who will come.

[12 : 27] And when Moses dies, the writer of Deuteronomy at the end of the book tells us that to this day, one like Moses has not yet come. So there was an expectation or a thread in the Old Testament that the prophet or the one like Moses would come one day in the future.

John's answer now is very brief. No. He's not playing games with them, but he's not interested in talking about himself and who he is.

His abruptness and briefness of response is because he's wanting to point to somebody else. Who then are you?

They ask him at last in verse 22. Let's have an answer for those who sent us. You can imagine the delegation getting a little bit toey because they wouldn't like to return to Jerusalem and say, well, all we've found out is that he's not the Messiah, he's not Elijah, he's not the prophet, we don't know who he is.

Who are you then? We need to know. We need to have an answer. And John's response is, I'm a voice.

[13 : 45] He's, in a sense, putting himself down. He's saying, who I am doesn't matter. It's what I say that matters. I'm a voice. I'm really an offstage announcer.

I'm the Peter Smith of Channel 9 who you hardly ever see on television but whose voice is always there because he's very important. Because he tells us what program's coming up next or who's about to speak or who the compere is or what's about to happen.

Peter Smith's very important but we never see him or rarely see him. John the Baptist is a voice. He's the announcer. He's the offstage voice.

He's not really a character in his own right. He's saying, who I am as a person doesn't matter. Really what matters is that I'm a voice and therefore what I say, what I announce, what I herald, that is what is important.

Perhaps it's not coincidental that in this chapter 1 of John's gospel, John the Baptist is the voice but the word, the substance, the content is Jesus himself.

[14 : 55] Now John here is not just saying I'm any old voice. He quotes Isaiah the prophet. I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord.

Why does he quote that? Why pick on Isaiah chapter 40? He does it deliberately and he picks a chapter that is very important in the Old Testament.

You may even remember from nearly a year ago preaching through Isaiah coming to this great chapter. One of the most important parts of the Old Testament. Isaiah 40 is where the book of Isaiah changes tack.

From announcing judgment on sinful people, Isaiah 40 is the first note of hope and restoration basically in the book. That God would bring back his people from their exile in Babylon.

Their sins would be forgiven. The glory of the Lord will be revealed. The valleys shall be raised up and the mountains laid low. There will be a highway through the desert for God to come and pick up

his people and carry them back to Jerusalem and to himself.

[16:07] That's what John's referring to when he says I'm the voice because in that chapter comes the herald who says I'm the voice announcing that God is coming to do all this.

So what John is saying here is that the exile of God's people is about to end. Oh yes, it's true that 538 years before Jesus the Persians allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and they rebuilt the temple and rebuilt the walls and resettled there.

The exile was over physically, geographically but spiritually it was not. Though the people had returned by and large to the land their return to the Lord was still lacking.

Isaiah himself could see that that their return to the land would not actually be the end of real exile. but not only would there be a figure who would politically allow them to go back to Jerusalem but Isaiah anticipated a person who would restore them to God a separate person so that the geographical return was only a model for the spiritual return to God.

You may remember seeing that last year when we looked at Isaiah. John the Baptist is saying here that that promised person who would restore God's people to God is about to come.

[17:40] He's about to bring about that spiritual reconciliation and restoration between God's people and God. So in quoting these words from Isaiah 40 John the Baptist is saying now your sins will be forgiven for that's there in Isaiah 40.

Now the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. Now there will be a new exodus of God's people from slavery to sin into God's eternal promised land. Now God himself is coming and he will carry his people home.

They're the words of Isaiah 40 and that is what John is announcing here as this voice. And implicitly then he's saying to his questioners you're asking about the wrong person.

I'm just the voice announcing the really important person who is to come. That's the one that you should be taking note of.

So why then do you baptize they ask him in verse 25. If you're not the Messiah or Elijah or a prophet what authority do you have to baptize anybody?

[18:54] And again John doesn't give a direct answer to the question. Rather he turns again their attention to the other person. Why then are you baptizing?

John answered them I baptize with water. That's not a reason for baptizing it's just how he does it. But among you stands one whom you do not know.

The one who is coming after me. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal. In the ancient world the teachers and rabbis would rarely get paid.

Their disciples and pupils would in effect pay them by doing jobs for them. In one sense they were like servants or slaves. But the Jewish laws of John's day and later made a very important distinction between the pupil or disciple and the slave.

the pupil disciple would not have to untie the sandals and wash the feet. The slave would do that.

[20:05] The disciple or pupil might do all sorts of jobs for their teacher rabbi but they would not go that far to untie the sandals and wash the feet which after all was a fairly important thing to do in a dusty hot climate.

That was the slave's job. John says I am not worthy even to untie the sandal. That is I'm not even worthy to do the lowest job.

The job that no disciple would do only the slave would do. I'm not worthy even to do that he's saying for this one who is to come. No false modesty he's being truthful.

John is pointing consistently to another person. The other person. And to this point his questioners and his audience do not know about whom he speaks.

In the film *The Third Man* which has just celebrated a re-release for its 50th anniversary a film with Orson Wells in it. The question is who is the third man?

[21:15] A man had been killed by a truck and three men were seen taking the body away. Two were easily identified. But the investigator is saying who is the third man here?

Well we don't have three men in John 1 but it's the same sort of question. Who is the other person?

That's what John the Baptist is asking. That's what he's telling his questioners to ask themselves.

Not who are you but who is the other person? And this day of questioning ends without an answer.

The questioners have to wait to the next day verse 29 tells us and then at last the answer is clear.

We have to remember that even though we know who it is John's initial readers may not have

known and the questioners in the audience would not have known. For them the identification is

stunning even if for us it's familiar.

The next day John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and he declared publicly his questioners are there the audience is there and now comes this great declaration about Jesus Christ here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

[22 : 38] A familiar expression many of our hymns some of which we're singing today have the expression about the Lamb of God or behold the Lamb of God or the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world and yet intriguingly it's not an expression that's found in the Old Testament which is usually John's background what's he referring to the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world or some would say that he's referring to the Passover where an animal would be sacrificed to enable God's people to come out of Egypt into the promised land but the Passover sacrifice was not always a lamb it was often not nor was it specifically a sacrifice to take away sin maybe it's the daily sacrifices that would be offered in the temple but again they're not necessarily lambs certainly never the expression lamb of God is used and not all of them are to take away sin some would say well what he's referring to here is the lamb that is led to the slaughter in

Isaiah chapter 53 a passage that is in many places of the New Testament applied to Jesus the one who carries the iniquities of the world the one by whose wounds we have been healed that's the passage I'm referring to but again in Isaiah 53 it's not called the lamb of God even though he does deal with sin I suspect that this expression of John the Baptist here is to encompass all the sacrifices of the Old Testament the daily sacrifices the atonement sacrifices the Passover annual sacrifice the special sacrifices and vows and offerings as well as the promised sacrifice of a lamb in Isaiah 53 John I think here is declaring that the whole Old Testament sacrificial system culminates in Jesus Christ it points towards him for us we probably can't quite grasp the significance of this but if we were a

Jew of John day we would be very familiar with offering sacrifices it would be part of our regular religious ritual routine daily sacrifices weekly sacrifices the three main feasts of the year basically whenever you had a religious festival you'd offer a sacrifice probably about the sort of equivalent for us would be having a barbecue where we think of barbecues as something that are fairly common for us so would sacrifices be for the Jews John is saying here that all of that ritual which they are so familiar with comes to a head in Jesus Christ he is the one who takes away sin he is the lamb of God God's own provision for sacrifice not something that we have to supply and he takes away sin not we're not told how here that's later but the result is that sin is gone that after all is what Isaiah chapter 40 was about sin forgiven so people could be restored to God John is saying here something that's very important that all the patterns of the Old Testament find their culmination or fulfillment or goal in Jesus Christ Christ the reason John the Baptist knows that Jesus is this person is because God has revealed it to him John says in these verses 30 to 33 that God had said that when you're baptizing people there will come a time when the Holy Spirit like a dove will descend and settle on one of the people you're baptizing that is the person who is the Lamb of God that is the person who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and so John was baptizing by the Jordan River and at some stage before these events here in this chapter

John has baptized Jesus and then as he baptized him down came the Holy Spirit like a dove and it remained on him the significance of that is I guess threefold the Spirit descending upon him was probably to fulfill what again Isaiah had predicted that this servant who would die would be filled with God's Spirit or have God's Spirit in him or on him secondly the fact that the Spirit remains on Jesus at his baptism is to set him over against the Old Testament leaders on whom the Spirit came but would leave them like Saul and Samson and others this one is the promised King the one on whom God's Spirit remains but thirdly too this Jesus is one who baptizes with the Spirit he doesn't just receive the Spirit but he's also the means by which God's Spirit is given to others that again is a promise of the

[27 : 55] Old Testament Jesus is the inaugurator of the new age of God's Spirit well John the Baptist in saying this his questioners about Jesus he's not talking about himself but about this one who is here now in their midst who has come he is wanting the Jewish leaders to believe in Jesus Christ he's pointing them to him so that they'll believe in him and receive him he's saying to them that his evidence is reliable that his testimony is truthful and sure he says in verse 34 I myself have seen and have testified that this is the son of God not just any son of God but the divine son of God John the Baptist wanted his Jewish questioners and these Jewish leaders to believe in

Jesus John the gospel writer wants us to do the same that's why he's recorded these events for us he wants us to believe in this same Jesus he wants us to know that Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world that Jesus is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit that Jesus is the son of God that Jesus is the one who was promised from the Old Testament that Jesus is the one who brings about the restoration of God's people to God promised in Isaiah that he is the servant of Isaiah and so on and we don't need to see it or see him to believe because John makes it very clear that even though there are those in this gospel who see Jesus and believe blessed are you who read this gospel who do not see but yet believe when summer begins it'll be the time where you can take out your hammock put it in the garden and sort of luxuriate there in the shade and the warmth under the trees if you study a hammock you'll notice that it has long ropes or threads from one end to the other and the bit that you actually line like a sort of stretcher bed has got basically the long bits with the cross bits to make sure you don't fall out in a sense the Old Testament is like the center piece of a hammock it has lots of threads that seem to just sort of run parallel with each other but don't always connect with each other so in the Old Testament you get threads to do with sacrifices or the king or the servant or the anointed one the Messiah or the promised restoration of God and his people or the promise of God's spirit lots of threads that seem to run parallel through the Old Testament what John in his gospel is doing and here is just one part of that is drawing together all those threads of the Old Testament and showing that they all come together in Jesus Christ all the key threads of the Old Testament point in the end to him we've just seen a few of them today as we look through John's gospel in the weeks to come we'll see other Old Testament threads that come together in Jesus Christ John the gospel writer is saying here that everything the Old Testament anticipates and looks forward to finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ Christ well the application of this passage is fairly straightforward it is here to encourage the readers as well as the original Jewish leaders and questioners to believe in this Jesus Christ the application for us is the same do we believe in this Jesus Christ have we received him do we place our faith and trust in him this lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world I guess for us there's a corollary question is the Jesus whom we believe in and have received the one described here or do we have perhaps a different or smaller view of who Jesus is the view of Jesus here is as big as it could be he's human he's divine he's totally sufficient as a sacrifice for our forgiveness and atonement and reconciliation to God every thread of the Old Testament finds its culmination in him if you have believed and received Jesus is this the Jesus that you've believed in or does your Jesus need to get a bit bigger in its scope let's pray God we thank you that you were faithful to what you promised and you sent Jesus to fulfill all your promises of the Old Testament help us to believe in him and to receive him that our sins may be forgiven and that we receive the promised

[33 : 47] Holy Spirit we pray this for Jesus sake amen S we they might have not maybe but came