

## John 1:29

**“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”**

Since the late 80s I have been using a leaflet published by the Scripture Gift Mission

- ‘Day by Day’ – four Bible verses for each day of the week
- I have given away hundreds of these in pastoral work, particularly in hospitals
- Since 1990 I have also used a bookmark or postcard with a coloured picture
- At St Agnes, Barry and Inverness, these carried different pictures
- But in addition to the information about church activities printed on the card
- There has been a short gospel message that I wrote myself nearly 20 years ago

“The God who made the universe loves us yet our relationship with him has been broken by our unbelief and disobedience. Through Jesus Christ, his Son, God came to seek after us and to save us. Jesus died for our sins, has risen from the dead and is calling us now to follow him. He offers forgiveness for the past, new life for the present and hope for the future. With our grateful thanks we offer God our worship and service, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

This paragraph represents my attempt to express the Christian faith as briefly as possible

- It is just 86 words long but I always feel happy when someone takes the card
- For, whatever the limitations of what I may or may not have said
- I hope that the brief gospel statement will speak to them
- In terms of church publicity, the bookmarks and postcards are not cheap
- The latest ones work out a just over 4p each – but they are good quality
- The same as picture postcards for which people will pay 10 times that much
- The theory being that people will be receptive to good quality publicity

Recently, I was visiting in one of our local hospitals

- The person I called to see was in a bay with six beds
- This always presents the minister with a challenge
- If you speak to everyone, you run the risk of intruding into other people’s space
- If you do not speak to everyone, then you have your nose in the air
- And only speak to your own because others are not good enough for you
- In such circumstances, I always try to say even the briefest hello to everyone
- Often I am carrying *Day by Day* prayer leaflets and church picture postcards
- Very rarely, does anyone refuse to take a leaflet or a card

On my recent visit I met a young woman from Stoke (Devonport)

- As my family come from that part of the city, I know the neighbourhood well
- And soon got to grips with where the young woman lived
- As I was about to move on to the next patient, I offered the young woman a leaflet
- ‘I wouldn’t want one of those, thank you.’ She replied
- It was a strange moment – for it clearly was not a rejection of me as a person
- We had got on really well and had plenty to talk about
- I don’t even think it was a rejection of Jesus
- But it was a rejection of something that she knew that she did not want

Finding ways of sharing Christian testimony is important to me

- Not because I'm a minister and it's my job (though I am a minister and it is my job)
- But because sharing the good news of Jesus is an important part of being a Christian
- In our passage from John (1:19-34), we find the testimony of John the Baptist
- 'Now this was John's *testimony*' (1:19)
- 'Then John gave this *testimony*' (1:32)
- 'I have seen and I *testify*' (1:34)
- but what can we learn about giving testimony from the example of John the Baptist

## I IT POINTED AWAY FROM HIMSELF

Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."

(John 1:19-20)

The next few verses continue with a dialogue between John and the priests and Levites

- The miracle of the incarnation (majestically expressed in the Prologue, 1:1-18)
- Is now confirmed by the testimony of witnesses, beginning with John the Baptist
- who affirmed to the priests and Levites that he was not the Christ
- that is he was not the Messiah or the anointed one, the prophesied deliver of Israel
- the priests represented the theological authorities of the nation
- the Levites were concerned with the ritual and service in the temple
- But John the Baptist did not seem to fit any category or person that they knew about
- They asked him, perhaps in exasperation, 'What do you say about yourself?' (v. 22)
- He was a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'

The Jerusalem delegates challenged John's call to a baptism of repentance

- This might well have followed the pattern of proselyte baptism
- Gentiles seeking to be admitted to the religion of Israel
- Which required the renunciation of evil and complete immersion in water

But John is always concerned to remove the attention away from himself

- He is baptising with water but one greater than he, as yet unknown, is among them
- In a household of his day, the lowest slave removed the sandals
- And washed the feet of guests – the picture is clear – John is as the lowest slave
- In the presence of the one who is about to be disclosed

There is an important lesson for us all to learn here and it is not an easy lesson

- When I was first a minister I heard a lot from my members about previous ministers
- As I visited them I would know which minister they were most likely to talk about
- Rob, or Peter, or Gordon, or Brian, or Cyril, or Douglas – or even Jimmy
- And Jimmy was their minister before the war!
- But as I was leaving the church, so I realised that some might talk like that about John
- And I was not pleased – for I learned in that moment that my greatest successes
- Might also be, at one and the same time, my greatest failures
- For in affirming that no one did it like me – they could not see beyond me to Jesus

Previously, John the Baptist could only hint at the coming of Christ

- Now he identifies him plainly speaking directly of the identity and purpose of Jesus
- For to be true disciples it is necessary to know who Jesus is
- And by his will to be completely transformed to be the people he wants us to be

## II IT POINTED TO THE PERSON OF JESUS

It had been by God himself that the true nature of Jesus had been revealed

- Once again John's Gospel uses the word 'testimony' to describe John's work
- John the Baptist gave this testimony

John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

(John 1:32-34)

John the Baptist was witnessing to what inquirers need to know in order to be true disciples

- Being a Jesus' disciple does not mean thoughtlessly following a person named Jesus
- It does not simply mean having an emotional experience, void of theological content
- Conversion and discipleship affect both the mind and the heart

By describing Jesus as one who was before him (1:30) John the Baptist echoes earlier words

John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"

(John 1:15)

This verse clearly relates to the Word, who was with God in the beginning (1:2)

- It is this Word who had become flesh, this Word whose glory has been seen (1:14)
- It is these verses that clearly associate Jesus with God

The appearance of the Spirit was quite common in the Old Testament

- But the Spirit's work was mainly with designated leaders (kings, judges, prophets)
- And the Spirit remained with them only for the duration of their God-appointed work
- But John the Baptist says that the Spirit came down and remained on Jesus (1:32)
- A permanent anointing, an anointing like nothing before, the one who is the Messiah
- An anointing of the one who is the Messiah, John's final testimony to Jesus
- Shows again his commitment to pointing away from himself to the person of Jesus
- For this whole chapter is one in which the identity of Jesus is declared
- He is the Word made flesh (v. 14), Messiah (vv. 20, 41), Prophet (v. 21)
- One who baptises with the Spirit (v. 33), rabbi/teacher (vv 38, 49)
- Christ/anointed one (v. 41), chosen one/Son of God (vv. 34, 49)
- King of Israel (v. 49), Son of Man (v. 51) and at least one other great title

### III IT POINTED TO THE WORK OF JESUS

Although all the titles of Jesus say something about his person and his work

- John the Baptist uses a great title of Jesus, familiar to Christians
- And yet uniquely used in this passage – Lamb of God

When I preached my first sermon as a Methodist local preacher on note on 22 July 1979

- My text was these words from John 1:29 but I used the *Revised Standard Version*
- ‘Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’
- As someone once said, whoever could preach a great sermon on the word ‘Look’?

The title, ‘Lamb of God’ only appears here and at John 1:36

- As someone once said, whoever could preach a great sermon on the word ‘Look’?
- The vital question is what does it mean? American writer, Gary Burge, recalls
- ‘I once asked a mature, adult believer why Jesus was called the ‘Lamb of God’
- and was told, ‘Because Jesus is gentle and nice’

There are five rich traditions that may well help us understand ‘Lamb of God’

- when Abraham was willing to offer his only Son, Isaac, as a sacrifice (Gen. 22)
- God provided a sacrifice of deliverance and Jews thought of all lambs in that way
- the temple sacrifices, a lamb was offered each morning and evening (Ex. 29:38-46)
- the Passover lamb, the gospel alludes to Jesus being the Passover victim (19:31-36)
- so although John the Baptist does not call Jesus ‘the Passover Lamb of God’
- we can take that inference
- Paul will later say, ‘for even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us’ (1 Cor. 5:7)
- the sacrificial lamb that the prophet spoke about in Isaiah 53:7
- ‘He was led like a lamb to the slaughter’ is quoted in Acts 8:32-35
- using the same word for lamb which Peter also uses (1 Peter 1:19)
- despite some theologians saying this imagery of the lamb does not apply to Christ
- all NT quotations from Isaiah 53 apply directly to Christ
- (Matt 8:17; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:32-35; 1 Peter 2:22-24)
- the triumphant lamb in Revelation (Rev. 5)
- which illustrates the eternal character and completion of Christ’s sacrificial work

Together these various uses of the lamb in the New Testament

- point to the atoning work of Christ, that is, by virtue of his life blood shed for us
- the sinner, previously encumbered by sin, and excluded from God’s presence
- is able to enter into the holy presence of God and to know him through Christ

Innocence, sacrifice, substitutionary atonement, effective obedience and saving power

- are all caught up in the title ‘Lamb of God’
- Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world
- Not because Jesus is ‘gentle and nice’ but because Jesus died on the cross
- When he died on the cross he died in innocence – that the guilty might go free
- He died as a sacrifice – a pure and whole sacrifice – acceptable to God
- He dies as our substitute, he took our place in death that we might live
- By his effective obedience he offers saving power to all who believe in him

This is the testimony of John the Baptist, but in a wider sense

- these opening chapters of John's Gospel are about several testimonies
- For these chapters are about men (and later women) who meet Jesus
- Who discover the true identity of Jesus and recognise they will be changed for ever
- In this first chapter this applies to Andrew and Peter, Philip and Nathanael
- Just as later it will apply to Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well

Throughout the Gospel many people will be challenged to 'come and see' Jesus

- But nowhere will they see his person and work more clearly than on the cross
- Christian conversion is not knowing a lot about Jesus – concluding he is a good man
- Christian conversion is coming to the cross yourself and trusting Jesus personally

Gary Burge, is tutor in New Testament, at the famous Wheaton College near Chicago

- The college has produced a whole crop of notable Christians
- Christian writers - William Craig, Carl Henry, Josh McDowell and Philip Yancey
- Missionary martyrs – Jim Elliot and Nate Saint (Mission Aviation Fellowship)
- And none other than Billy Graham

Dr Burge observes that the student body is passionately committed to God

- but notes that more recent students have arrived with little depth of knowledge
- he writes how shocked he was to learn:

Students from strong, conservative churches were sending us some of their best Christian eighteen-year-old students who did not know who came first, Abraham or Moses. They were not sure if Barnabas was in the Old Testament or the New Testament. When asked to put a list of major biblical books in proper order (such as Exodus, Psalms, Isaiah, Matthew, Romans), they failed miserably. When asked if Paul believed in the resurrection of the body, most said "No." Here were young Christians for whom personal piety ran deep, but for whom a coherent, intelligent grasp of the Bible was beyond their reach.

When the test moved to matters of theology and church history, it became clear that these students were not sure what to do with names like Augustine, Luther, or Wesley. We were seeing if the gigantic heroes of the faith were even recognized.

We wondered whether some of the most important decisions about life and belief were a part of their theological equipment. Could they explain Christian belief from the ground up — beginning with our commitment to one God (monotheism) and leading on to an orthodox Christology? We looked at fundamental matters of Christology, salvation, the doctrine of Scripture; in most cases, students seemed singularly incapable of formulating a coherent doctrinal basis for their identity as Christians. Nevertheless they did "love God."

This discovery sobered many of us and renewed our commitment to curricular goals that go far beyond mere piety. Students are coming to us who understand the “Christian walk,” but who do not understand “Christian thought.” Their lives have been baptized, but seemingly, their minds have not. They have devoted their hearts to following the Lord, but they have not mastered the bare essentials of Christian history and theology, much less Biblical theology and history.

It would be nice to think that the situation would be different in modern Britain

- but I think that is most unlikely to be the case
- for fear that the church would have no young people at all
- It seems to me that Christian youth work in Britain majors on experience
- This equips people to know God through Jesus Christ
- But I am not sure it equips them to share the good news with others

It is clear that on the one hand it is useless to know a lot about God but not love God

- to know Christian doctrine but only in a formal and theoretical way
- but, on the other hand, it is not simply enough to have a Christian experience
- without being able to share rational thoughtful Christian faith and belief with others

In John 1 we meet people who have an experiential dimension to faith

- but that faith is coupled with profound belief in who Jesus is
- the pattern seems to be set for us today in our Christian witness
- the first thing we must do is point away from ourselves
- Behold!
- how difficult that is in our self-obsessed generation
- then we must point to the person of Jesus Christ
- The Lamb of God
- Then we must point to the work of Jesus Christ
- Who takes away the sin of the world

John the Baptist, Andrew, and Philip each bring others to Jesus quite intentionally

- New Testament converts make new converts
- But is that true in the church today?
- Is it not true that our churches contain people who love God
- But whose understanding and content of the faith is diminishing?
- So that our own people readily admit they do not feel confident to share their faith

What was it that caused the young woman in the hospital to turn down my offer of a leaflet?

- The honest answer, of course, is that we shall never know
- Was it the counter-productive witness of the church or a Christian she knew?
- Was it a second-hand impression of what being a Christian is all about?
- Was it simply for what of a person of her own age and background sharing good news
- What is the task of today’s Christian?
- Nothing more than this – a meaningful engagement with our peers and neighbours
- And an invitation to ‘Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’