

Good Friday C / 25 March 2016  St John the Evangelist, Oxford

Isaiah 52:13–53:12 / Hebrews 4:14–16, 5:7–9 / John 18:1–19:42

Behold, the man...

 In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit —
Amen.

On the 14th of Nisan, between the ninth hour and the eleventh hour, tens of thousands of Israelite men — under the guidance and with the assistance of all the priests and the Levites who could be brought to the Temple — sacrificed lambs for the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who had come up to Jerusalem to observe the feast. Worshippers crowded the inner courts of the Temple (perhaps you can imagine the courts as Tom Quad; a little longer, a little narrower, but good enough as a comparison). The Passover–sacrifice was slaughtered for so many that the Mishnah says they were divided into three successive groups, since there were more men and lambs than could be fit into the Temple courts at once. The first division entered until the court of the Temple was filled, when the doors of the court were closed, and the shofar sounded one sustained note, a wavering note, and another sustained note. The priests then placed themselves in double rows leading from the Porter’s Lodge and Bachelors’ Row past Mercury and the Deanery, to the very steps of the cathedral, each priest holding either a basin of silver or a basin of gold in his hand, but one row of priests had to hold all silver basins and the other all gold.

Each Israelite slaughtered his lamb over a basin, while a priest held the basin to catch all the blood and handed it along to another priest, who in turn passed it to another, and each receiving a full basin, at the same time returning an empty one. These basins had rounded bottoms, with no base, to prevent weary priests from putting them down, slowing the process, allowing the blood to coagulate. The priest nearest the altar poured out the blood in one continuous stream at the base of the altar, roughly where the doors of Christ Church cathedral would be. When the first division had sacrificed their lambs, they went out and the second entered; when the second went out, the third entered.*

This is what our patron evangelist wants us to see and hear — the bleating of lambs, the hubbub of worshippers and priests and Levites elbow to elbow, jostling, slitting the throats of their offerings, moving to the rear, advancing to a priest. And the blood, the blood sloshing in basins of gold and silver, hand to hand, the blood splashed at the base of the altar. In the background, the sound of pilgrims singing *In exitu Israel, Non nobis*, singing “I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem”; and at intervals, the sound of the shofar.

While Matthew, Mark, and Luke want us to see a Passover *supper* in the *cenaculum*, St John wants us to see and hear, to smell, to feel in our bones the sights and sounds of the Temple court as he narrates for us the Way of the Cross. Make no mistake, John says: this was a *sacrifice*. Try as we might to hollow out Christ’s sacrifice into a theoretical abstraction, John insists that we make that connection to blood and din and music and aching muscles. “Behold — ἴδε — the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” John *distinctively* identifies Jesus as the *lamb*, and emphatically departs from the timetable the other gospels

set. In order to make Christ truly known, in order to testify to his truth, John directs our attention to the Passover sacrifice, a sacrifice of liberation and of salvation from death by the blood of a lamb.

While hundreds of priests were busily offering up thousands of lambs in the Tom Quad, at the top of South Park — near enough that you could have heard the sound of the shofar — there our great high priest offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, and when it was ended, he passed through the heavens and entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of lambs, but with his own most precious blood.

Jesus demonstrates the sacrifice that is well-pleasing to God. For our sakes, he sacrifices the prerogative to *justify himself*. He sacrifices the determination to *have his own way*. He sacrifices *everything* to which we lay our desperate claims. He sacrifices the need to *win*, to take violent vengeance against those who slandered him, tortured him, even against who reviled and maltreated the little ones whom Jesus loves. If we traffic in bloodless abstractions and generalised ethical guidance, John, and Jesus, grip our arm and remind us that in the scene at Golgotha, atop the hill in South Park, Jesus actually *sacrificed* something, with prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, with unfeigned agony and actual blood.

So our high priest — holy, blameless, undefiled, exalted above the heavens — this our high priest was himself sacrificed, and in willingly taking up the path to the cross, he made available to sin-saturated mortals the salvation that his sacrifice effected.

I find no fault with the priests in the courtyard, down in Tom Quad, intently observing the ceremonies of their traditions without error. They fulfilled an unequivocal commandment from God; they said the black, and did the red. More than that, I would probably be down there

with them; it's the busiest festival of the year, my name is on the rota, it's all hands on deck with a three-line whip. Hundreds of thousands of faithful, pious, hungry Israelites were waiting for their lamb; *somebody* had to do the sacrificing.

On the 14th of Nisan, at the top of yonder hill, within the sight of the pinnacle that overlooks Tom Quad and all the bustle and all the blood, somebody made the sacrifice: Jesus, the high priest who embodied innocence. Even the judge who condemned him to death found no guilt in him. This innocent man was executed at our behest. We have condemned and murdered the Righteous One, who did not resist us; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth, this Righteous One who has made many righteous.

The shofar sounds; the basins clatter; the high priest spills out the blood. Make no mistake: this was a sacrifice.

Behold, the Lamb of God. Behold the Man.

AMEN

* From m. Pesahim 5.5-7; E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief* 63 BCE - 66 CE, 133-135.