

Silent Reflections

24th February 2026

Lamb of God

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."

John 1 29-34

This passage is the first part of the Gospel passage we had for the Second Sunday of Epiphany this year. It is the second of a sequence of four dramas, presented as 'days' that follow the great prologue of John's Gospel (In the Beginning was the Word ..., John 1 1-18). In the first day, religious leaders from Jerusalem come to question John the Baptist about his identity (is he the Messiah?) and his baptizing. This is Day 2. In Day 3, John is standing with two of his disciples and again draws attention to Jesus as "the Lamb of God" whereupon these disciples, one of whom is Andrew, follow Jesus. This third day was the second part of the Gospel passage for the Second Sunday of Epiphany. In Day 4, Jesus calls Philip and Nathanael.

When I heard the reading of this passage, I was struck by how familiar the depiction of Jesus as the Lamb of God is to us now and wondered what the people who heard John the Baptist's proclamation would have made of it.

Central to Judaism is the Passover or Paschal Lamb – the lamb sacrificed to commemorate the Passover and the Exodus from Egypt.



By Francisco de Zurbarán

There is also the sheep provided by God at the last minute to avoid Abraham sacrificing Isaac – well, alright, this was a ram rather than a lamb but let's not get too hung up on detail!



By Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

The Lamb that takes away the sin of the world might also have reminded the audience of the scapegoat – one of a pair of goats used in the Yom Kippur service that had a red sash tied around its horns to represent the sins of the people and that was driven out into the wilderness.



By William Holman Hunt

The Agnus Dei is used in the liturgy for the Eucharist either as the bread is broken or immediately afterwards:

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.

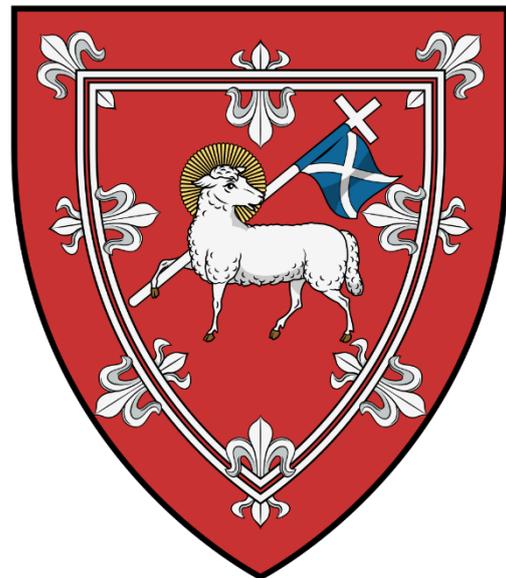
Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, grant us peace.

Many depictions of the Lamb of God include the flag of a red cross on a white background. As with all Christian symbols, this is probably less familiar now than it used to be. Nevertheless, Oxford is far from unique in having a Lamb and Flag pub, albeit that it is arguably the most famous.

It feels to me that we are living in uncertain times where the dangers of the far right are gaining traction. I find a very worrying aspect of this to be the rise of what has been called 'Christian Nationalism'. One manifestation of this is that people are being encouraged to join the church not because of the love of God, or for any of the other expected reasons, but through naked islamophobia. There is a narrative that we, as 'a Christian nation', are under threat from a 'wave of Islamic migrants seeking to impose Sharia law' and that this is the form of Christianity that will counter it.

It strikes me that the symbolism of the lamb and flag is at risk of being hijacked. This is because a flag with a red cross on a white background is, of course, the flag of St George, the patron saint of England. Indeed, until I did some research while preparing these notes I too thought it was the flag of St George. However, it seems that it has more to do with representing the triumph of Christ over sin and death or that it represents the blood of Christ washing away sin. If this is the case, it is particularly unfortunate that the crest of the city of Perth has a representation of a lamb and flag with a saltire – there is no doubting that this is the cross of St Andrew the patron saint of Scotland!



Finally, here is a poem you may find helpful:

Little lamb, who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed,
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, woolly, bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice:
Little lamb, who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

Little lamb, I'll tell thee,
Little lamb, I'll tell thee;
He is called by thy name,
For He calls Himself a Lamb:
He is meek & He is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by His name.
Little lamb, God bless thee,
Little lamb, God bless thee.

The Lamb, Plate 8 from Songs of Innocence and of Experience

William Blake (1757 – 1827)

For reflection:

1. Spend some time with the illustration of the Paschal lamb, the ram provided by God and the Scapegoat on pages 1 and 2. How do they make you feel?
2. The Agnus Dei is familiar to us. Is it perhaps too familiar? Spend some time gently praying the words. How does that make you feel?
3. What is your reaction to the rise of Christian Nationalism? How would you want the church respond to this?