

2A SFX 2022

John the Baptist – Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

John the Baptist is with us today not as a fiery preacher, not as a desert ascetic, but as a witness. In John's Gospel the Baptist is the first of many witnesses to Jesus.

But what a strange and serious introduction the Baptist gives to the Lord as he sees him for the first time. "Look", says John, "*there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*" It is what the priest says at every Mass, holding the Sacred Host. "*Behold the Lamb of God.*"

Although familiar, it is perhaps rather strange to think about Christ as a lamb. What do we think of when we see a lamb in the fields? One of God's gentle and friendly creatures. We think of spring and newness of life. We think of innocence. But in the Biblical context it also suggests the ideas of sacrifice, death and redemption. Both suffering and triumph. "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain." So much in a word. No wonder William Blake wrote his poem addressing the young sheep.

Little lamb, who made thee?...
Little lamb I'll tell thee!
He [Christ] 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!"

So when the priest says "Behold the Lamb of God" they are not just words. In a single image we might be saying: "Behold, the gentle, innocent one, who is new life for us, by his death and by his sacrifice." Behold the one who washes away our many sins. Wonderful.

John the Baptist is today presented as a witness, and it is a moment for us as individuals and as a church to reflect on our true and false witness.

This Wednesday we begin the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*. I have to say that this octave of prayer seems to have less impact than it has had in the past. Is this a bad sign that we are now less interested in Unity? Or is a good sign that relations with other Christians are becoming a little more normal and natural? I think it is the latter. I think we are beginning to love each other better. Later in John's Gospel Jesus will pray to the Father: "*may they be one as we are one, that the world may believe that it was you who sent me*" John 17. The implication is that division in the Church gives a false testimony to the world. Christ wills unity for his Church.

Historians will rake over the coals of what happened at the Reformation for blame and guilt. We have left a sad trail of bitterness and recrimination. Anyone who has tried to untangle the rights and wrongs of a family row knows how difficult it can be to get back on track. I wish Harry and Megan would stop shouting. It takes time, generosity, love and understanding to bring families together again.

When Pope John XXIII spoke to the observers from other Churches at the Second Vatican Council he said to them: "We do not intend to conduct a trial of the past. We do not want to prove who was right and who was wrong. All we want to say is, Let us come together. Let us make an end of our divisions."

We can't live in the past. We have to see where we have got to and find ways to move forward. Controversially Pope St John Paul II made an Ash Wednesday Jubilee apology for the Church's infidelity to the Gospel and acknowledged the sins of Catholics against other Christians. Pope Francis said we should not allow old wounds to continue to harm the relations between us and other Christians. The Christian does not say: I have done no wrong here. Christians together point to Christ and say: "*This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*"

We can stand firm in our own faith and love our own tradition without denigrating the other. Why don't we say we want everyone to become Catholics. "*End your rebellion*" and "*Come home to Rome.*" That would be nice and simple! But is it realistic given the knotty histories we share? We might say we have found something in the Catholic church that we want to share: fullness, beauty, grace and truth and the loving, beating heart of Christ. But we also know a Church that has been at times unfaithful, intolerant and harsh. There are truths that we hold dear that others have missed. But there are also truths that we have neglected, and others help us see better.

Speaking of our relationship with other Christians, Pope Benedict said: "The important thing is that we truly love each other." This we try to do. Many here are engaged in different ways with the practical work of Ecumenism. We pray and sing and work together. And as we do this, the old prejudices lose their power.

And, to speak just of the Anglican Church for a moment, when Pope Benedict travelled over to Britain for his Apostolic Journey of 2010, he said to the journalists: "It seems to me also that Anglicans and Catholics have the simple task, the same task, the same direction to take. If Anglicans and Catholics see that both are not there for themselves, but are rather instruments of Christ...; if both follow together the priority of Christ and not themselves, they draw closer together, because the priority of Christ brings them together, they are no longer in competition, each one seeking greater numbers, but are united in commitment to the truth of Christ who comes into this world, and so they find themselves also placed reciprocally in a true and fruitful ecumenism."

John the Baptist stands before us today as a witness to Christ, the holy one of God. As we, together with Christians of other denominations point to Christ, if our focus is on him, on his goodness and truth, then this priority of Christ will bring us together.