The Prayer of the Lamb

December 24th, 2017

4th Sunday of Advent

When the angels appeared to the shepherds, the gospel says that the glory of the Lord shone around them. It is hard to think of a more glorious announcement than the news that God had sent his Son into the world to live among us. And this is the constant theme of the gospels—from birth to resurrection to the final revelation: "God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them" (Revelation 21:3). God wants to live with us, to make His home in us, to have us make our home in Him (John 14, 15). The nativity, of course, is a perfect icon for contemplating this. For four weeks, we have been building our own nativity icon or scene through meditations on the scriptures and through poems by Carmen Bernos de Gasztold. The ox, the ass, and the goat have all taken their place around the manger. And this morning, we complete our icon with the addition of the lamb. The lamb is one of the most reasonable guesses for animals that might have been with Mary and Joseph. After all, one or two lambs might have wandered down the hill after the shepherds who saw the angels singing in the heavens. The lambs might have belonged to the overwhelmed innkeeper who gave them a stable to sojourn in. It is natural to close these meditations with sheep, for the symbolism of the lamb is well known to us throughout the gospels. The first name that John the Baptist bestowed upon Jesus was that of the lamb: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

It is as a lamb that Jesus shows his love to the world. The lamb was central to the faith of Mary and Joseph, for the lamb is a sacrificial animal. It gives its own life to provide for people. It provides food, clothing, milk, and atonement for sin. Even in Revelation, the Risen Christ is pictured as "a Lamb as it had been slain" (Revelation 5:6). Jesus was born in Bethlehem, so that he might die in Jerusalem. From birth to death to resurrection, his entire life was an act of purification, an act of atonement, an act of self-giving, self-sacrificing love. On the cross, God showed the world God's own true nature—the God who holds nothing back, the God who would give everything to creation, the God who is love, the love depicted in the wounded hands and feet, the wounded back and ribs, the wounded head, the wounded heart. Behold, the lamb of God who was forsaken in order to be glorified, in order to glorify the forsaken creation. In our day, we hesitate to speak of atonement, of the blood of the cross, of the pain that we cost. It is an embarrassment to us to remember the torture that bought our freedom from sin and death. It is hard for us to come to terms with the fact that we do not really deserve grace; it truly is a free gift from God, but a gift that came through the darkness of Golgotha. To be sheep following the Good Shepherd means imitating Him by being crucified to the world, by practicing self-giving love, by carrying our crosses, by decreasing that He might increase, by loving to the point of agony. Why must there be sacrifice? There is a fable from Aesop that goes like this: "A wolf was chasing a lamb, which took refuge in a temple. The wolf urged it to come out of the precincts, and said, 'If you don't, the priest is sure to catch you and offer you up in sacrifice on the altar.' To which the lamb replied, 'Thanks, I think I'll stay where I am. I'd rather be sacrificed any day than be eaten up by a wolf.'" In a fallen world, we are going to die no matter what we choose in life. That is the sadness of our condition. The world can eat us alive, or we can lay down our lives in holiness and in love. The question of how to live cannot be separated from the question of how to die. The world wants to eat us every day, and yet we are afraid of sacrifice. This life was not ours to begin with—we did not fashion ourselves, we did not breathe spirit into ourselves, and yet we hold onto ourselves as if nothing else existed, as if God has not made provision for us, as if God never sacrificed for our sakes. And yet, there is joy. I believe the sheep in the fable gives us very wise advice about living in the world. One can wander among wolves in fear of being eaten, or one can live joyfully in sacred space, ready to be sacrificed if need be. That is the nature of love. Last week, I spoke of Kierkegaard and goats, so this week, lest I fall behind, I will mention Dostoevsky and sheep. While making notes for his last great novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky was thinking about Schiller's great hymn *An Die Freude,* which we all know from Beethoven's "Ode to Joy". As his notebooks reveal, while thinking about this majestic hymn and its view of progress and universal love, Dostoyevsky apparently also made note of another hymn, *De fide orthodoxa,* a more ancient hymn by the Syrian theologian John Damascene (George Steiner. *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism.* 2nd. Ed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996. 334-336). It goes like this:

*Resurrectionis dies: splendescamus, populi:*

*Pascha Domini, Pascha.*

*E morte enim advitam, et ex terra ad coelom,*

*Christus nos traduxit, victoriam canentes.*

*Day of resurrection: let us rejoice, ye people:*

*Lamb of God, Lamb*

*From death even unto life, from earth to heaven,*

*Christ has led us, singing alleluia.*

In other words, there is great joy in being the lamb. For the Lamb of God was born from heaven into this world so that we might also be born from on high and lead to heaven by His shepherding word, by His redeeming Spirit. The day of resurrection began the day that Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem.

There are virtues that sheep teach us. Sheep are quite dependent on their shepherds for care. And God showed the world the importance of dependence by sending us the Messiah who was dependent on God for every breath, every moment, every word, every miracle, every parable, every act of kindness and prayer. Through dependence and obedience on the will of the Father, Jesus showed us what true devotion and love look like. For He was truly the lamb of God. Carmen Bernos de Gasztold brilliantly speaks of this loving dependence and desire for closeness through her "Prayer of the Lamb":

A spindle on four legs

leaving tufts of white in the thickets,

I am Your lamb,

Lord,

in my soft wool.

My bleating

sends its puny note

into the ewe's heart;

my fleece

throws its curly shadow

on the cropped grass.

Look, Lord,

how my joy must leap!

Yet my need of my mother

never sleeps in me.

Let me run to her

with my wavering steps

and draw some of her tenderness.

Oh,

don't let it happen,

Lord,

that one sad day

I will miss her.

To summarize this prayer, we could say that the lamb desires to be close to its parent more than anything, and I can think of no better way to explain the love we should have for God. On the one hand, we want to go out and explore and live joyfully, sent out by God into the world. And we want to show God our joy and what our joy can do in the world. With the lamb, we say, "Look, Lord, how my joy must leap!" Nevertheless, there is a desire in our hearts for God, a desire that only God can fill. As the lamb says of its mother, "My need of my mother never sleeps in me. Let me run to her with my wavering steps and draw some tenderness. Oh, don't let it happen, Lord, that one sad day I will miss her." Nothing terrifies the lamb more than the thought of being separated from its mother; nothing should terrify us more than the thought of losing our relationship with God the Father. Like the lamb, we should pray, *Don't let it happen, Lord, that one sad day we will miss you.* For day by day, we should run back to God, even with our wavering steps, desiring to draw some tenderness from our God. What the lamb discovers in this prayer is the beauty of togetherness, of communion. For these are the heart of devotion and love.

When I first read the prayer, I was amazed at the self-awareness Carmen de Gasztold placed in her little lamb. The lamb knows who it is and describes itself quite well: "A spindle on four legs leaving tufts of white in the thickets". That is an apt description of a good disciple. A good disciple is fragile, even weak, yet through God's grace leaves traces of God's light throughout the world, just as the lamb leaves traces of its wool. And the most the lamb can say about itself is: "I am Your lamb, Lord." That is how Jesus lived his life. Every miracle and parable, every kind word and even fierce word, every teardrop and smile from the Lord Jesus Christ is an expression of this pure self-awareness, this purity of will and purpose, this innocence of living in grace and saying, "I am your Lamb, Lord."

The desire for togetherness fuels our singing *Alleluia!*  as we follow Christ, as we run like the shepherds in search of this new thing from the Lord, this new day, this new world dawning. In Christ, the love of God was made known to the world. The birth of Jesus is the birth of hope for us, for we can live and die and live with purpose, and more importantly, with joy. It is no accident that the angels appeared to the shepherds, and it is no accident that they revealed through their celestial music the good news that God was preaching to them: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (Luke 2:14). The love of God is glorifying God, and showing peace and good will toward all humanity, receiving the gift of salvation, as the shepherds joyfully welcomed and received the sign from God, "The Messiah, the Lord… a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:11-12). And the love of God is also praying, like Carmen de Gasztold's lamb, saying: "I am Your lamb, Lord." As we gaze at the stable, at Mary and Joseph, at the ox and the ass, at the goat and the lambs, let us also this Christmas, behold the lamb of God!