

180126 'The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.' (John 1:35-37)

"Behold, the Lamb of God" exclaims John the Baptist to his two disciples that were standing with him. At that very moment the disciples left John to follow Jesus.

Two days before, hardly anyone had even heard of Jesus, other than his family and friends from his home town of Nazareth. On this day, John the Baptist was challenged by the priests and Levites about what he himself was doing in baptising Jews, given that John claimed neither to be the Christ, nor Elijah, nor a prophet. Baptism otherwise was regarded as only necessary for a Gentile when they wished to adopt the Jewish faith.

John's reply only deepened the mystery:

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord', as the prophet Isaiah said."

So no, John was not the Christ, but he was the herald of the Christ.

The following day John saw Jesus coming toward him. Now John the Baptist knew Jesus, or at least he knew Jesus the family member. Remember, they were cousins, we learn this in Luke 1 from v.39. Therefore, it is hard to believe that they had not met at family gatherings, at least during their childhood, if not as young adults. Would John's intuition have told him then that Jesus was the Messiah, the saviour, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world? I would doubt it.

Yet, John was moved to say on seeing Jesus approaching:

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (v.29)

John went on to bear witness and give a description of who Jesus was. We cannot be sure at this particular point whether John had already baptised Jesus at this point and thus seen the Holy Spirit descend like a dove upon him; theologians are somewhat divided on this point, but interestingly, John states:

'I myself did not know him'.

Twice he emphasises this (vv 31 and 33)

Now what does this tell us? It indicates to us that though John recognised a family member, he was now seeing this same person in a completely different light; John must have had a revelation that this was not just Jesus 'the family member' that he knew and loved. More than that, this was the 'Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world', the one of whom he was called through ministry to love, expect and proclaim.

In this respect it is of little importance whether John had already baptised Jesus or did so after this moment. John's comment 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' in Matthew 3:14 is applicable either way.

One can imagine John's shock, but he did not let astonishment get in the way of the ministry to which the Lord God had called him. He revealed Jesus for who he truly was; 'The Lamb of God'.

So, why didn't John's two disciples, in v.29, at John's first declaration: 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world', go and follow Jesus there and then, at that very moment? The answer is simple. This, in v.29, covers the day that Jesus was coming towards them.

V.36, however, signals the day after and tells us that Jesus was no longer coming toward them, or staying with them, but was walking by, away from where John was. It was at this point that the disciples had to make a decision.

I can imagine that the disciples had asked John the night before about what he meant by "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Possibly they had spoken to Jesus himself, so when they saw Jesus leaving, they sensed here was someone even greater than John to follow, and of course, they would be right.

But what about this phrase 'the Lamb of God', what does it mean? Jesus was very conscious of what he called himself, so I think he would say if the title John uses was not applicable. As Jesus raises no objections, he must have accepted it as correct. So what is meant by the 'Lamb of God?'

John the Baptist could have had several strings of Jewish thought in mind when he used the phrase and, perhaps even he did not yet know fully its meaning. He might have been referring to the horned ram that leads a flock. In this case the 'Lamb of God' would serve to indicate Jesus as 'the King of Israel'. However, I suspect it goes deeper than that.

Remember in v.29, John not only refers to Jesus as "the Lamb of God" he refers to him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world". To John Jesus was not just a King to lord it over his people; he actually came

to do something, to take away the sin of the world. How could Jesus do that as a mere mortal, for only God can take away sin?

Then we have to look at other Jewish thoughts about lambs, all involving the idea of sacrifice. There was, of course, the sacrifice for the Passover, celebrated annually, where a male lamb of the first year and without spot or blemish was taken and sacrificed as a symbol for the atonement of sins. However, this was a festival primarily to remember the Exodus of God's people from slavery in Egypt; the paschal lamb itself did not itself take away sins.

Another example was the daily sacrifice in the Temple where again, lambs without blemish were sacrificed for the atonement of sin, but unlike the sacrifice of Jesus, this had to be done daily. It was not a 'once for all time' action, so it was difficult to see how this could apply directly to Jesus.

What about the lamb provided for Abraham when he was going to sacrifice his son Isaac? This lamb was a substitute in a test of faith, for a son who, as it turned out, was never sacrificed. So again, not quite the same thing.

Perhaps John was thinking of the 'suffering servant' of Isaiah 53, where the sin-bearing function is clear:

'But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth' (vv.5-7)

Whichever the Baptist meant, the words would be familiar indicating to his hearers that at some level that this man was different,

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" prepared the Baptist's hearers to later understand the full implications of Jesus' death and resurrection in terms of the forgiveness of sins:

"This is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."

John the Apostle, in the first of his letters makes this clear.

'If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation of our sins' (1 John 2:2)

What does that word 'propitiation' mean? It properly means the removal of wrath by the offering of a gift. In this case the wrath of God, that is, the permanent attitude of the just and holy God when confronted by sin, is removed by the sacrifice of Jesus, and through our faith in him, it is removed from us completely.

So, when John the Baptist declared: "This is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." It was indeed good news. Hear it and believe it to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.