

A Sermon preached by Fr Justin White on Sunday 15th January 2006
Epiphany II

What if I were to tell you that what we poor, deluded people are doing here today is, in fact, the first, seemingly innocuous step on a path that will lead us to strapping explosives to our waists and detonating ourselves on a crowded tube train?

Well, that, at least, was the view expressed by Professor Richard Dawkins, evolutionary biologist of this university, popular face of militant atheism, sometimes known as 'Darwin's Rottweiler'. He was, in fact speaking of poor deluded pilgrims at Lourdes, but I feel sure he would want to lump us in too.

You might have seen his latest excoriating attack on religion on last week's TV. It was called *The Root of All Evil*. If not, you can catch his second diatribe tomorrow night on Channel 4, entitled: *The Virus of God*.

Now I, for one, believe that a healthy theism needs a strong atheism: really good opponents with clear ideas about the nature of what they are denying, against whom we can sharpen our mettle. It is a real pity, therefore, that our chief opponent comes in the form of Professor Dawkins whose attack is lamentable and dated and increasingly shrill.

For a scientist who vaunts the scientific method, it is alarming how unscientific his methodology is. In gathering sample data he chooses the most extreme examples of religiosity – religiosity which has become mixed up with ethnicity and nationality and the struggle for land and power. He completely fails to engage with the history of considered reflection on how human beings relate to the meaning we call God – considered reflection that has taken place over two thousand years of Christian theologising and continues today, on Professor Dawkins' doorstep, in the Theology faculty of his own university.

In his attempt to expose 'the business of unthinking called faith', Dawkins puts up some straw men who serve only to shed more heat than light on the God debate. Does he not realise that these collection of zealots and fundamentalists upon whom he trains his sights are just as appalling to sensible theists as they are to evangelical atheists?

Dawkins may have missed the point but, unwittingly, his film serves to remind us of just how easy it is for people of faith to miss the point too – of how easily the Gospel of the Lamb can be misunderstood.

Missing the point.

When we hear the Baptist's confession, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world', we imagine we have a pretty clear understanding of what sin means. But the word translated 'sin', *hamartia*, comes from the verb *hamartano* which means to err, to be mistaken, to miss the point.

So from what propensity to ‘miss the point’ does this Lamb of God come to free us?

Well, we all know what the image of the Lamb is meant to conjure up in our minds. Call Jesus ‘the Lamb of God’ and we think of the chosen animal of sacrifice; the one offered up on the altar to appease the gods. And so, we suppose, what is being revealed to us today by John the Baptist is that Jesus is the sacrificial victim, the one offered up to appease the wrath of God – to pacify the monster whom we have offended by our sinfulness. He is the currency in a special deal done to put us back in favour with God.

And that reading is widely held. In fact, if Professor Dawkins’ statistics were correct, we must assume it is the commonly held view among the majority of those calling themselves Christian in the United States.

‘Good people do good things and bad people do bad things ... but for good people to do bad things, that takes religion.’

Well, armed with this god, Dawkins may be right. For this god of vengeance, this god who demands that someone pay the price for sin is not the God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

But if God isn’t like that, what is he like?! If God wasn’t satisfying God’s wrath, or righteousness, or honour in the death of Jesus ... if Jesus wasn’t the lamb sacrificed to appease God, then how can we say that we are saved?

I suggest to you that when the Baptist declares Jesus the Lamb of God, he does indeed identify him as one who will be a sacrificial victim, given over to appease a wrathful monster. But here’s the shock: The wrathful monster is not God ... it’s us.

If anyone is being exposed here, it’s us! It’s humanity's sacrificial predilections that are being exposed and deconstructed here and in the story of Jesus’ Passion. This is the Lamb of God: not the lamb of the human community given to God, but the Lamb of God given to the sacrificial human community. Who is it that demands the sacrifice? Is it God? Is it God who has his fist in the air, shouting, "Crucify him!?" No. It is the crowd - the mob - us.

This is the Lamb of God who comes to take away our *hamartia* – our propensity to miss the point, our besetting sin which is to continue to wish to dwell in this murderous sacrificial construct – a construct which shores up our religious identity, our religious purity, by offering up new sacrificial victims – those pariahs outside the fold, over and against whom we can set ourselves.

Our besetting sin, our besetting ‘missing of the point’, is that we love to make sacrificial victims out of people. We choose our scapegoats, our sacrificial lambs, and heap upon them the ills of our society.

Jesus, the Son of God, came and freely gave himself over to our murderous ways, to expose them for what they really are and to show us that we need never live like that again. The Goat of humanity was, for our sakes, the Lamb of God. In his sacrifice to us he puts an end to all sacrifice.

In a moment we will celebrate that 'sacrifice to end all sacrifices' and at the high-point of the Eucharist, the president will hold the broken bread and wine outpoured and say, 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'

And the Good News is that, when we have taken full ownership of our own violence, our own propensity to make sacrificial victims of others, and know ourselves even then to be fully loved and forgiven, there will be nothing we cannot forgive, no wound that can stand in the way of love.

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In one fulsome review in praise of Professor Dawkin's achievement, the writer, without a hint of irony, concluded with: 'Thank God for Richard Dawkins!'

I sha'n't thank him for his contribution to the debate but I can thank him for reminding me of a god I neither know nor would ever choose to know, thank you very much.