

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 19th January 2020 11.00am
Dr Anita Oji MD

John 1: 29 - 42

As a grandparent my daughters often invite me to meet with their children en masse. It enables them to continue developing relationships between the cousins and as other friends join in, the children are introduced as such – cousins. So over this Christmas we had times when food was shared and games were played and some stayed overnight, sleeping together and learning about each others interests and differing parental boundaries. I can imagine John and Jesus doing the same. Their mothers Elizabeth and Mary were cousins, John's dad was a priest in the Temple and Jesus' dad was a carpenter, perhaps creating beautiful presents for the two boys. Elizabeth and Mary had spent three months living together when they were both pregnant. Where then and when had John taken up with the idea that Jesus was the Lamb of God? Was it something to do with Zechariah, John's dad being a priest and sacrificing animals in the Temple? Was it in relation to games they had been playing as lads? Was it in regard to something said by the parent's or what they had learned from reading the scriptures in the synagogue?

As a term of endearment I sometimes call one of the grandchildren a chick. Invariably my grandson, being autistic, takes offence. In Scotland I am called a 'wee hen' and it is usually said lovingly. Sometimes though reference to animals may not be complimentary but the animals referred to are mature. A lamb is not a mature animal. Why does John who baptised Jesus give him the name of a young animal, one that could be considered immature, playful, and unable to get food or look after itself (or as a metaphor in the context of social justice, have no direct voice in decisions that can affect the next generation)? Is it simply a statement of endearment? Probably not, because God is involved. So, where do lambs fit into the Jewish world of John and Jesus?

Sheep were a source of milk, food, wool and skins for clothing and tents. They were reared to be killed, as they are today. Most were killed for economic reasons but some were slaughtered in the Temple. It was recognised that such animals were essential for human existence and this made them a special offering to God. Not a money offering as we give to churches today, but a living sacrifice. John's father would have been involved in these forms of worship. The animals were killed and then cooked as food for the Temple staff. It was all part of Temple

worship and the format was written down, similar to our Methodist Worship Book, how to make confession for sins. You chose your animal depending on the gravity of the sin according to the biblical book of Leviticus, a bit like giving more money than you usually put on a collection plate in order to assuage a guilty conscience. Unlike big animal sacrifice where only the powerful in the government or temple would present a large bull to mitigate things they had done wrong, anybody could sacrifice a lamb. I think it is this notion that the lamb can represent anyone and everyone is highly significant, because God's love and forgiveness is unlimited; it is available to all people whatever their condition. It's like John the Baptist saying, look here is a person who matters to everyone whatever they have done and whoever they are. You don't have to be a family member to get to know him; Jesus is for me and you at this point in our lives.

What I found interesting though was in Leviticus (Chapter 4 v32 onwards) that the lamb had to be female. Let me read this instruction from God to Moses: 'If you offer a lamb as a sacrifice for sin, it must be a female that has nothing wrong with it. Lead the lamb to the altar (and later)....the priest will send it up in smoke to me, together with a food offering, and your sin will be forgiven.' If the sacrificial lamb had to be female then how does this apply to Jesus, a man? It was Isaiah (Chapter 53 v7) who prophesied that the Messiah, Jesus, would be silent as a lamb led for slaughter and this passage is recorded as read and interpreted by Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8 v33) to be relating to Jesus. Perhaps the interpretation of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb is circumspect.

One reason for my questioning Jesus being like an unwitting lamb is because John's gospel records Jesus saying 'No one takes my life from me. I give it up willingly! I have power to give it up and the power to receive it back again, just as my father commanded me to do.' (John 10 v18). Hence unlike an animal for slaughter, Jesus was in control.

Another reason concerns the gender of the animal; sacrificial lambs were female not male. It may seem inconsequential to mention this within our culture, because when I go into a supermarket I can find the country of origin of the meat I buy but not its gender, except for braces of poultry. However I remember when I was in Nigeria and had to buy live animals for our food I was advised to buy female goats because their flesh tasted different than that of males. I am not sure that applies in this case because there is another element relevant to male animals. Those of you who watch Countryfile on the television will have seen Adam the farmer with his prize ram or tup. It is only when the male animal matures that you can assess its

virtue for the whole flock and then it is no longer a lamb but a fully grown animal. Hence we need to factor in that Jesus was no youngster but a mature man.

Perhaps I have taken you too objectively through animal sacrifice and you prefer to consider lambs as used figuratively, symbolically as gentle, innocent, defenceless creatures with dependency, family bonds and relationships to the mother and within a flock. You can find all these pictures of lambs in the Bible. So, what could John the Baptist be saying when he repeatedly introduced Jesus as the Lamb of God?

At what time did John perceive Jesus is the Lamb of God is not material in this story. It may have come about through the revelation of the parents to the boys; it may remain a mystery. What matters is that John enabled folk around him to be attracted to Jesus and gave Jesus the opportunity to become close friends with John's friends.

For me the key message is about relationships, not the relationship between family members as was between the two men, but about Jesus the man, being God. Now my experience of relationships comes strongly from within my family. When I visit my youngest daughter I sit in her studio looking into a field of lambs and often venture among them. So my physical relationship with lambs has been when they are out in the air, frisking about, running and jumping. Is this a picture of being alive to God? Is it that God is always on the move around us? Maybe you live in an urban environment and don't see the lambs' antics, so let me give you a more local example from street furniture. As I walk along the pavement close to home there is a hum from a couple of electric vehicle charging ports. They never stop humming but are sometimes used to recharge car batteries. They remind me of our relation to God, he is always close, always humming, always waiting, and ready for the moment to be actively plugged into our lives. So how do you recognise God's activity now as exemplified by Jesus Christ's life so long ago? The poet RS Thomas makes God's presence known in his poem titled Folk Tale (based on the story of Rapunzel): Prayers like gravel flung at the sky's window, hoping to attract the loved one's attention. But without visible plaits to let down for the believer to climb up, to what purpose open that far casement? I would have refrained long since but that peering once through my locked fingers I thought that I detected the movement of a curtain.

In reading Canon Mark Oakley's book 'The Collage of God' he says 'I would not spend so much of my time and energy immersing myself in the patterns and stories of faith if I did not believe that within them I can be awakened to the divine and

ultimate reality I call God.’ Awakened to the movement of God in our lives, like the wise men guided by the star, like John’s disciples meeting Jesus, like RS Thomas’s revelation, the next question in the gospel narrative is what do you want? ‘Come and see’ says Jesus followed by some words that I think require explanation. The King James’ Version reads ‘He said unto them, Come and see. They came and saw where he dwelt and abode with him that day.’ Other translations replace ‘abide/abode’ with ‘saw where he lived’.

The translations hinge on the Greek word ‘meno’ which translates as abide or live and because we no longer use the word abide, its meaning has been diluted. In past times ‘abide’ meant ‘endure’ ‘await’ or ‘continue’. The Greek ‘meno’ therefore has a number of meanings related to the verb ‘to live’. For example, if I say ‘I live’ then I am not dead. I can also express where my attention is and if it is on my mobile phone I can say ‘I live on line’. Alternatively I can follow the ideas of mindfulness and be ‘in the now’ and describe my activity as living in the moment instead of letting my mind drift off – as you may be doing – thinking of things to be done, what’s for lunch etc. In our version of the gospel where the word abide has been replaced with a much more limited phrase ‘saw where he lived’, we have to be aware of the original Greek. John uses ‘meno’ repeatedly because it has this wide meaning. It includes continuity of life despite adversity and not letting external things upset you. Imagine the recent air crash in Kazakhstan when passengers escaped from the wreckage - with an internal peace, as one survivor described. That is abiding – having peace within turmoil.

Another example of the use of the Greek word ‘meno’ is in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus asks his friends to be with him, not to be upset by whoever or whatever occurs but to wait by him. They did not manage to do so and left him alone. They did not abide. (‘He said to them ‘My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, to death. [Meno] and watch’ King James’s version Mark 14 v34)

Abide is both a word of command and a call. The command is to a special relationship we can each have with God, beginning to live in God’s presence; the call is the invitation to continue the relationship, to join in communion with other worshippers. In order to stay in relationship with God we have to put our efforts into living as Jesus did. This includes obeying his Word, loving one another, continuing in faith, living truthfully and seeking goodness. John’s gospel is sparse on the details of the sleep over when Jesus invites the friends to stay. We are not told the details of who made up the beds, who prepared the supper, who cleaned up afterwards, who washed the dirty clothes they had been out in all day. There are elements of sticking to this life, following a call, that are mundane, unsung,

forgotten, and not on social media. How do we cope with that call to abide when things do not go to our plan?

The word abiding, has an extra dimension; it implies more. It includes dependence – deriving power and life from the source – here is a picture of the Lamb of God based on relationships. Jesus' human dependency on God can reflect our dependency on God. Learning to abide, to take Jesus at his word, his deeds to shape our thoughts, to form us, describes what our dependence as Christians, looks like. As I walked among the lambs in my daughter's field, they would come to me and rub against me. In fact they would rub against most things standing. One side of their stable had a well worn oily mark and of course that was their rubbing post. A picture of Jesus leaning on God is one I take from the lambs in the field and one that represents to me a picture of our lives in relation to God. We lean and depend on him.

So abiding involves continuity – our call is to go on trusting, to go on depending and never stop believing Jesus came to love and save us all from our selfishness and give us the gift of freedom (John 8 v31,32).

John the gospel writer tells us that if we come and see what he has written, if we allow it our attention then everyone can live in Jesus Christ, we will endure whatever is thrown at us, we will be one with him showing God's love to others. (John 14 v17, 25).

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