

A G N U S D E I

BY

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FRAY LOUIS OF LEON has already treated of this title, but his book is little known and less read—more's the pity—and I have felt justified in treating of it for that reason.¹

We know that it is a title of Christ because St John the Baptist gave it him when they met, for the first time in early manhood, on the banks of Jordan. It may seem strange that St John, when pointing out 'him that was to come' to his followers, should from all his titles choose this one: 'Behold the Lamb of God' (*John* i, 29.) Why did St John think 'the Lamb' the title most fitted for the occasion? We can but surmise, yet such surmise may give us insight into the meaning of this title, even if we cannot be sure that all was present to the mind of St John himself or of his hearers.

There was an ancient story told of the father of their race, Abraham, that one day there was demanded of him a sign of real belief in his God and in his God's promises. It took the form of God telling Abraham to kill his only son Isaac in sacrifice. To Abraham this would seem like wiping out all hope of descendants, wiping out likewise the hope that God's past promises about his descendants could come true, namely that they would be as numerous as the sand on the sea shore or as the star dust in the sky. But, even more, it seemed to ruin any hope in the promise of the Saviour of the world born of his children's children. Yet Abraham believed against belief, and took his son up the mountain-side. When Isaac asked his father where the victim lamb was, Abraham made the prophetic reply, which had more meaning than he knew, that God himself would provide the lamb for the sacrifice.² Perhaps when St John saw Christ at that moment, his mind flew back to that episode. For two thousand years and more the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham and Sem, had waited for God to provide the Lamb for sacrifice. Jesus, son of Mary, had come into the world, and he was that sacrificial victim.

This name, besides, was suitable and almost inevitable on the lips of St John, if we remember his teaching: for his message was primarily one of liberation from sin. He made no mistake, the king-

¹ In order to make my treatment fresh, I had avoided reading Fray Luis's section on the Lamb of God in his great book, 'de Los Nombres de Christo', before writing my own.

² Gen. 22, 7-8. cf. LXX and the Hebrew text. The Vulgate however gives *victimæ*, probably because God provided a ram.

dom to be founded was one of the spirit, not one of gold, won by a conquest over sin by sacrifice, not over earthly rivals and by war or insurrection. As he stood there at a crossing-place by the running waters of Jordan, he was not stirring up the people to revolt, but to repentance. He made them confess their sins and he cleansed them with the pouring of water.³ Far from preening himself on being the forerunner of a great king, he wore the clothes of sorrow and penance. 'He that was to come' was not about to free the Jews from the slavery of Rome, but was to be the victim offered to God for our sins; he was to be the key to our salvation, the solution. 'Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world'. All through the past history of Israel the Lamb of sacrifice had stood as a symbol for this being. There is no more essential understanding of the Incarnation than that implied in the title given to Christ by St John the Baptist at the moment when Christ was about to begin his public life. Christ came to save from sin by the sacrifice of himself, a Lamb led to the slaughter.

How wide that saving was indeed, as wide as the world! Not a saving merely from the sins of Israel, but 'the sins of the world'. Perhaps, again, St John's mind had swung back at that moment to Isaias, the prophet of salvation through suffering. It was certainly to such passages as these that Christ himself referred when speaking to those two disillusioned disciples trudging to Emmaus. They were complaining that their hopes for the establishment of the Messianic kingdom had been smashed by the terrible end of the Messiah, an end on a gibbet. He, the Messiah, replied, 'Oh, how dull of vision are ye, and how slow your hearts to believe all that the prophets have said! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer that, and so enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted for them that which concerned himself in all the Scriptures'. (Luke 24, 25-27.) That was the first Easter Day. St Luke gives us no more; what Christ said on that occasion about the prophets and how they spoke of him is not known.⁴ But it is certain that the prophet who clearly spoke of the Messiah suffering and so entering into his glory was Isaias. Here is the passage. *Oblatus est quia ipse voluit, et non aperuit os suum sicut ovis ad occisionem ducetur, et quasi AGNUS coram tondente se obmutescet et non aperiet os suum.* (53, 7.) Christ went as a lamb to the slaughter and opened not his mouth before his accusers. Of all the attributes in the Passion of Christ, perhaps the most poignant is his silence, which

³ Luke 3, 8; Mark 1, 6.

⁴ On another occasion Christ read a passage from Isaias 61, 1; 58, 6. cf. Luke 4, 16 ff.

weighed so heavily on the consciences of the priests and on that of Pilate and on the pride of Herod.

The point our Lord was making with those disappointed walkers to Emmaus was that the Messiah was to conquer his kingdom only through suffering in meekness for the sins of many. All Christians likewise will fight their way to the standard-bearer, Christ, by suffering silently, patiently, meekly. The whole world has been straining for conquest by the sword and by pride and self-assertion. But those weapons are the reverse of the weapons used by Christ; his sword was love, his shield patience, his helmet silence, his breast-plate meekness. We are given no word of his when soldiers whipped him with thongs, no word when they mocked and crowned him, or when they spat upon him; his words on the Cross were of understanding and forgiveness of his enemies, or of compassion for Mary his mother and for John his friend.

This reference to the prophet Isaias has a more extended meaning than as a symbol for patience. The lamb was the special animal for sacrifice. Christ was the lamb of sacrifice, the sacrifice of the New Law, the complete holocaust, the burnt offering. This should be borne in mind when considering the Last Supper. The more the life of Christ is examined, the more pre-meditated and organic each act proves to have been. He chose to go up to Jerusalem, not at any nondescript time, but at the Pasch, which, as everyone knows, was the Jewish feast celebrated with immense pomp to commemorate the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. This freeing from slavery was the natural symbol for the freeing from sin, from the enemies of the soul. Now, just as the Israelites had been saved from the killing of every eldest son by putting the blood of a lamb on their door-posts, and then set out for the desert after the sacrificial meal, so every year devout Jews from every country under heaven, Parthians and Medes, and Elamites and inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya which are about Cyrene, and strangers from Rome. Jews also and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians (*Acts 2, 9-11*), would make pilgrimage to Jerusalem as sign of their gratitude. There they would sacrifice in their homes by a meal, just as it had been done 1,300 years before. With skirts tucked up ('loins girt') and feet shod, with staves in their hands they would, as it were, be ready for the journey of deliverance. (*Exodus 12, 1.*) That ancient delivery had been the saving of the race, and there had to be for ever a thanksgiving for it by the race. But the sacrificial meal before the great Exodus had been done in the privacy of every home; consequently, ever after it was repeated in the same manner.

This eating of the lamb had been no mere meal, but a sacrificial

one: *immolabitque eum universum multitudinem filiorum Israel ad vesperam*. Thus Christ celebrated in Jerusalem with his disciples this old symbolic rite of sacrifice as a thanksgiving for freedom; but that night a greater delivery was in progress, the freeing of mankind from sin, not merely from some ancient tyranny. On to this ceremony Christ grafted this new sacrifice of himself, the new Paschal Lamb.⁵ *Ecce Agnus Dei, qui tollit peccata mundi*. As St Paul says, 'For Christ our Pasch is sacrificed. (1 Cor. 5, 5-7.)

St John in his Visions frequently refers to Christ as the Lamb. The lamb was the symbol for sacrifice, the blood the life of the thing sacrificed, and once offered to God, in some way sharing in God's life. Thus St John would have us signed with the blood of the Lamb.

The Eastern mind is one that works by means of symbols, but a symbol must be a concrete thing. We speak of Christ's willingness to accept anything, including even death, which might follow on his doing his Father's will, as being the most worthy act of Christ as Man; the Eastern, the Jew, simplifies this rationalising of a complex act into an image, the image of the Lamb led to the slaughter, a lamb that opened not its mouth. When religion was real to the world, that was the meaning of sacrifice; the Lamb represented themselves who were primarily being offered to God, not physically, but in their minds and wills, their essentially human parts. Christ the Lamb of God is Christ the Victim, our representative. Thus the title given to him at the beginning of his ministry was fulfilled at its end.

⁵ For the Last Supper being the Paschal meal cf. Lagrange's Commentaries on the Gospels.