

**Homily for January 17, 1999
Second Sunday in Ordinary
Time, Cycle A**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Isaiah 49:3, 5-6
1 Corinthians 1:1-3
John 1:29-34**

We follow the Lamb of God, from whose weakness we draw our strength.

In St. John's gospel there is no infancy narrative. Jesus as a baby appears in St. Matthew and St. Luke's gospels. The coming of the Word of God in the flesh in John's gospel does not begin with the story of a newborn baby lying on the straw of the manger of a stable. No, in Saint John's Gospel, the paradoxical weakness of the power of God is not illustrated by reference to an infant. Another image takes its place: the Lamb of God.

The Lamb of God is an image that can be found in several non-Biblical Jewish writings, that predate Jesus. In these writings, that depict the final battle between good and evil before the final victory of God, a lamb is portrayed as a conquering figure who defeats all the evil creatures that represent sin and alienation and rebellion against God. It is that very innocence and weakness that we associate with lambs, which made this such an arresting image, and it ties it in St. John's gospel to the infancy narratives of St. Matthew and St. Luke. For the image of the Lamb of God is a reminder that the way God works in the world is not the way many humans

think they would work if they were God.

God does not come with trumpets and armies to route the foes and put them to flight; but in silence and secret and seeming weakness. Yet God's weakness is the weakness of the plant that pushes through the paving laid by humans; God's weakness is the weakness of frost that heaves the earth and cracks a human-laid foundation. Just as the infant on the stable's straw symbolizes that victory and weakness, St. John's gospel does not have an infancy narrative, but it makes much the same point right from the start: those whom God cherishes are often weak in the eyes of the world, but to them has been promised the final victory, and it is appropriate that a child or lamb should symbolize the way in which God will bring about that victory.

The crucified is the image of utter weakness, vulnerability, nakedness and powerlessness...and yet also there in the crucified is the image of the total invasion of God - one so open that there is nothing left but God and God's power shining through that human weakness.

For most of us the expression "lamb of God" echoes with so many associations with sacrifice and the Passover lamb, that these images tend to blot out other ways of understanding what John might have meant here. Interestingly, it is only the gospel of St. John - and only here in the first chapter, in the part of the gospel

relating to John the Baptist - that the expression "Lamb of God" is ever used in the New Testament except for the book of Revelation. Other names would be given Jesus - true vine, bread come down from heaven, light of the world. The categories by which people name Him are not complete. Any name is only an intimation of what it means to follow the Lamb of God. Even we, knowing the whole story, have only glimpses, intimations, of what it means to follow through death into life, through weakness into strength.

If we look to human power and do not trust the weakness of God's power, we are not looking for Jesus, for the places of power are not where we look. If we seek money or status or security, we are not following the Lamb of God. The Lamb of God emptied Himself of power, carried no purse, was reviled and despised, and died in agony on a splintery cross slippery with His own blood. And yet, where the Lamb of God goes, we who are of His flock yearn to be and, as best we can, seek to follow.

It is not an accident that at communion time the priest elevates the bread and wine and proclaims: "This is the Lamb of God...happy are we who are called to his supper."

Things were going so well for the new minister... but he was sad knowing that those who do the Lord's work must somehow bear a cross and he as yet did not...until one day there was a meeting in which all hell broke loose...and no one knew or understood why he smiled.

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