

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

John the Baptist sees Jesus and he says, “**Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world**” (John 1:29). We are familiar with this title for Jesus (after all, we sing it at every Mass “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us... grant us peace,” right before receiving Communion), yet it would be a shocking thing to say about someone. What does it mean to be the *Lamb of God*?

If modern Americans were to go back in time to the ancient world, the thing that would most shock them would be *sacrifice*. Everywhere, every religion in the world required some sort of sacrifice – most often this was animal sacrifice (though some religions required human sacrifice). The Jewish religion was no different: at the heart of the Jerusalem Temple was the altar of sacrifice. While sacrifices took place throughout the year, the Passover was a key moment for the life of the Jewish people. As you remember, on the first Passover, the LORD told Moses to have each household slaughter a lamb, to put the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintel of their houses, and then to roast the lamb and eat it. The Passover was a defining moment for the people of Israel since it was the means God used to save the Israelites from the Angel of Death. It was from this moment that Israel was set free from slavery, and they set out, first for Mount Sinai to make a covenant with the LORD, and then to the Promised Land.

At the time of Jesus, millions of people went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Josephus, the Jewish historian, estimates that over 250,000 lambs were slaughtered in the Temple at Passover. Could you imagine the blood flowing out of the Temple, the crowds everywhere, the *smell*! This was a moment of celebration for the Jewish people that stood out in people’s minds.

Back to John and Jesus. John looks at Jesus and tells his disciples that He is the Lamb of God. He is telling us that Jesus will be slain – like the Passover lambs – to take away the sins of the world. Jesus Himself would be the sacrificial victim that would lead the people from slavery into freedom, from darkness to light, from the plague of sin into the healing of God’s forgiveness, from death to life.

It is important to note, too, that John states Jesus’ mission – *to take away the sin of the world*. Jesus did not come just to teach, nor simply to be a good example, nor to give us a new moral code. Jesus came to bridge the chasm between God and humanity caused by sin. Jesus’ primary mission was to take sin upon Himself and break its power, so that we could get to the Heart of God.

In a world that says, “there is no sin; there is no guilt; there is only hunger” (Dostoevsky, qtd. in *Throughout the Year with Fulton Sheen*, October 15), is it any wonder that Jesus has become a marginalized character? If Jesus’ primary mission is to take away the sin of the world, and the world teaches us that there is no sin, is it any surprise that the Churches are emptying? We are inundated by the psychology which denies sin and guilt as objective realities, the psychology which says, “Do what you want, what makes you feel good, what fulfills you,” the psychology that says that we define who we are, despite objective physical reality. Yet despite all of the promises of this feel-good psychology, depression, drug addiction and despair are growing and growing. If only we were able to recognize the truth, we could find a real solution to our problems.

And what is the truth? That sin is real. That by our choices, we really and truly can reject God, which means rejecting joy, love, peace and happiness. That we really can destroy ourselves, our souls, by choosing the “feel good” path that rejects God’s commandments. **But** (and this is most important), that we have a Savior – Jesus Christ – who came with the very purpose of taking away our sins, of forgiving us, of restoring our relationship with Almighty God. He did this not because we deserve it, not because we’ve earned it in any way, but because, and solely because, He loves us and chooses to have mercy on us.

When we embrace this reality, we don’t have to lie to ourselves or others about our choices, because our worth is found, not in our merit, but in the God who loves us, the One who chose to come and be sacrificed to take away our sins and the sins of all the world.

I pray that we open ourselves to the incredible reality of this grace, allowing Jesus to be the One who takes away our sins and the sins of all the world.