

Epiphany II (A) January 15, 2017
St. Timothy's Episcopal Church / Creve Coeur, Missouri
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John 1:29-42

Winston Churchill is a name familiar to many of us, but perhaps not to all. He was a British Prime Minister twice in the 1940's and 1950's. He was one of the first to warn about the rise of Nazism in Germany. When what would become WWII began he is credited with inspiring British resistance and shaping the "Keep Calm and Carry On" spirit of the English people.

He also was quite an acerbic wit, which is to say he could be caustic and rather sour in his many one-liners. One might say he was the original-human-twitter, before the dawn of social media. But there was always a playfulness and spark in his eye in his many one-liners. One object of his sharp comments was his successor as Prime Minister, Clement Atlee. He said of Atlee that he was "*A modest man, who has much to be modest about.*" He also said, "*He is a sheep in sheep's clothing.*"

Churchill did not mean it as a compliment. Sheep were not highly regarded, seen as passive and powerless. But in today's Gospel, when John the Baptist points to Jesus and declares, "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" he does not mean passive, meek and powerless. John is announcing; "This is the lamb, a sheep of God's own choosing, the Word made flesh, whose life, death and resurrection will transform the world."

The masses of people came from the city to be baptized by him, but again and again he deferred to Jesus: "*The Kingdom is not about me – it's about Jesus. I am not worthy enough to untie the sandals he wears.*"

What makes this Lamb the greatest transformer ever of human hearts and history?

The words "lamb" and "sins" would have resonated for those hearing John's declaration because they echoed memories of their father Abraham, as he attempted to offer his only son Isaac as a human sacrifice. In the story, God's messenger at the last moment instructed Abraham to substitute an available animal for his son. This Old Testament story has many nuances, but the most important is the change from what we see as the barbarism of child-sacrifice to the concept of substitution. God was going to accept a symbolic offering by which the person, family, tribe or nation were "atoned" and made one with their Creator. Around this understanding grew the Tabernacle and Temple cult, overseen by a priesthood descended from Moses' brother-in-law Aaron.

Additionally, John's hearers would have been touched by the growing tradition of the synagogue system. As aggressive world powers repeatedly conquered the Jews and separated them from the Temple, they gathered in synagogues to hear their Scriptures and be taught by the local rabbi how to apply those scripture to daily life. The rabbi became a key link to faithful living.

Today's Gospel brings together these two practices, not in a theory, but in a Person, Jesus the sacrificial lamb of God. He restores the dream of God to live in love and faithful fruitfulness of life. Jesus is the rabbi who explains the purposes of God and he is the sacrifice that resurrects the dream of God.

How Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross is a substitute for our sins and that "of the whole world," is perhaps best understood when we gather in the Eucharist. In the Holy Meal, we re-member and bring to life in the here and now "the cross, the tomb, the resurrection and the ascension." We do this so that enlivened by the Spirit's power, we "may be a people of hope, justice and love."

This is the dream of God, the fruit of the Jesus movement, that we go into the world in peace to love and serve the Lord.

That world is bookended by two significant events this coming week: the observance of Martin Luther King Day tomorrow and the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States on Friday.

A priest I know commented earlier this week that as "*dissimilar as these two are from one another, they have something important in common. In different ways and for different reasons, these two men revealed an America we did not wish to see, truths we would prefer to ignore.*" (B. Husson)

In his "I have a dream" speech, delivered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, the Rev. Dr. King confronted the sin of racism and lifted up the dream drawn from God and the teachings of Jesus:

When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Sadly, the sin of racism that King portrayed remains painfully recognizable in our nation, 54-years later. As faithful Christians, we must be vigilant and active against all behaviors and attitudes that deprive others of dignity, respect and freedom.

Donald Trump will become President at 12 noon this Friday, with a pledge to make "America great again." In my view, the presidential campaign and the November 8th vote revealed a deeply divided nation, an uncomfortable truth to face. Many who felt invisible and disenfranchised in this country made their understandable frustration powerfully apparent by their vote. Others, in the wake of the election, have expressed confusion, fear, and report that they feel threatened by how the future might unfold in this country. These are realities that are uncomfortable to face.

Here, too, I think that as faithful Christians in our great country, we must be vigilant and active against any behaviors or attitudes that would deprive others of dignity, respect and freedom.

As Christians, we are to be a people of hope, justice and love. On both MLK Day and Inauguration Day let us who regularly pray “Our Father who art in heaven,” recommit ourselves to bring that oneness in God’s love into a reality for all.

Parts of this homily adapted from a sermon by The Rev. Anthony Clavie, Vicar of St. Thomas’ Church, Glen Carbon and St. Bartholomew’s, Granite City, IL. and from the E-Newsletter of St. James’ Church, NYC. .