

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC      January 19, 2020**  
**Second Sunday of Year A      John 1:29-34**

“Dead man walking, dead man walking.” Jesus is a “dead man walking.” You may recall that phrase from the movie of the same title that is used in the penitentiary to describe a prisoner condemned to death as he proceeds to the place of his execution. When John the Baptist points to Jesus and says, “Behold the Lamb of God,” he is saying essentially the same thing: Jesus is a man condemned to death. Today we associate a lamb with traits like meekness, gentleness or docility, but for the ancient Jews a lamb was seen as the animal offered for sacrifice in the Temple. So, at the very outset of Jesus’ ministry, John the Baptist is making a reference to what will be His eventual execution. Jesus is already a “marked man,” a sacrificial victim. He is on a trajectory that will lead to His crucifixion on the hill of Calvary. To dramatize this even more starkly, in St. John’s Gospel Jesus is crucified on the Day of Preparation for the feast of Passover, the very day that all the lambs are being slaughtered in the Temple for the Passover meals that will take place the following evening. Jesus is the sacrifice of the new covenant, the new way in which human beings will be able to relate to God and to each other.

Who demands, who requires this sacrifice of Jesus? Some would say it is the One whom Jesus called “Father.” How so? One of the ways, but not the only way, that Christians have tried to explain the meaning of Jesus’ death is to say that Jesus died to atone for our sins. According to this explanation, God’s sense of justice is offended by the sins of human beings committed down through the centuries. So, God demands that a price be paid, that someone pay the bill. In this view Jesus pays the bill; Jesus takes the rap or us to get us off the hook.

But the problem with this explanation is that the God who would demand such a sacrifice appears as a God of violence, not the loving Father of whom Jesus speaks throughout the pages of the Gospels. This explanation is a caricature of God. In fact, it is not God who wanted Jesus to be sacrificed: God is not shouting “Crucify him, crucify him” in the courtyard of Pontius Pilate’s palace. God’s will for Jesus is not that He should die on Calvary, but that Jesus remain faithful to preaching the coming of the Kingdom. And the consequence of Jesus’ fidelity to that mission is that He is crucified on Calvary. It is human beings who require, who demand that Jesus, the innocent victim, should die, but why?

In the immediate events leading up to Jesus’ execution, we see played out the timeworn human drama wherein a crowd, or more likely a mob, gangs up on some

individual or a group of individuals to pay the price for all the hostilities, resentments, distrust and animosity that exist within a community, whether it be a family, a tribe, or a nation. The hope is that when that individual or group is dealt with, when those other people are punished or excluded, then the community can go about its business, as if all the tensions and conflicts have been resolved. One individual or one group of people is singled out and blamed for everything that is going wrong, so that everyone else then doesn't have to deal with the issues that actually divide them, and instead can carry on with a veneer of civility. Even in a secular context, we use terms that are essentially religious in their origin to designate this individual or these individuals. We speak of a "scapegoat" or of a "sacrificial lamb."

In the events of Good Friday, we see the religious and political forces of the day conspire against Jesus. Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas the High priest, and King Herod represent three different interest groups usually hostile to each other. Here they conspire and collude to eliminate Jesus whom each perceives as a threat to their individual vested interests. And in this process of seemingly coming together, all agreeing on one thing, i.e., the necessity of killing Jesus, they are able to put their usual animosities aside, thus arranging a temporary cessation of hostilities between them. It is Jesus who pays the price for their unanimity.

We human beings do the very same thing over and over again in any number of settings: in the schoolyard, in the workplace, even in the family. It is this perennial human tendency to want to find someone to blame in order to keep things calm, cool and copacetic that is exposed by the sacrificial death of Jesus on Calvary. We see this pattern occur again and again. On Calvary, Jesus allows Himself to be a willing victim in order to expose this pattern, this "sin of the world," which is rooted in all civilizations, so that there need be no such victims any more. Jesus exposes what has been going on throughout human history and, in forgiving His murderers, releases His own Spirit to transform humanity, so that those who heed His message will no longer require sacrificial victims, scapegoats in this spiral of violence.

Now let me be more concrete; let me give some specific examples of this human need for scapegoats. All we have to do is look at children playing in the schoolyard, how often they will pick one kid to gang up on; something like the kids in the novel, "Lord of the Flies." They achieve a group identity by singling out one whom they can bully. They bond together more closely by finding one to be the foil for all their anger. Then the "cool kids" and the "mean girls" can have the run of the schoolyard.

On a more adult level, it can happen in an office, amidst a team of colleagues who are supposed to work together. Everyone in this group may feel frustrated,

overworked, underpaid, not appreciated, etc. So, they proceed to gossip and find someone to blame. Maybe it's the boss who is designated as "the problem." Maybe it's a co-worker whom everyone seems to enjoy tearing apart. What is going on here? Somehow the resentments and the animosities, that the members of that this group have towards each other seem to diminish when they can coalesce as a group and together have some one individual to focus their anger on.

Let me give a case where this "scapegoating" can show itself within a family. Let's say that for whatever reason there is this family that can be described as dysfunctional; perhaps it is that one of the parents is suffering from the disease of alcoholism. Everyone in that family, the spouse, the children, recognize that there is this problem, but no one wants to talk about it, no one really wants to deal with it. It is this shared secret that looms over everything that goes on within that home—this shared secret that keeps the family together, keeps it going, but at the same time is destroying it.

Let's suppose all the children in the family appear to be good, obedient, respectful, dutiful, etc., but there is one kid in the family who is acting out, who is getting into trouble at school, or dabbling with drugs. The child who is acting out may, in fact, be the most healthy of all the kids, because he or she is allowing their inner turmoil, their anger about this unhealthy situation to surface. This child may not be dealing with their anger in the best, in the most constructive way, but the other children may simply be burying their inner pain in a way that will take its toll in years to come. Still, this "problem child" serves a purpose for the dysfunctional family, enabling everyone within the family to focus all their attention, all their frustration with the chaos that exists in that home, on the "problem child," and not having to confront and deal with the real problem of the alcoholic parent. All their energy is directed towards the one they make the "scapegoat," rather than having to face themselves.

Jesus is designated as the sacrificial lamb, as the scapegoat for all humanity, that there might be scapegoats no more. Tomorrow we celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and we recognize how far we have come in regard to racial prejudice, but also how far we still have to go. For, how easy it is to blame people of color, poor people, and poor people are disproportionately people of color, to single them out as if "they" are the problem: if they got their act together, then we have a much healthier society. So, we develop a policy of mass incarceration, the result of a racially based enforcement of draconian drug laws. Or it could be immigrants who are "scapegoated:" if we could only get rid of the immigrants, that would solve so many of our problems. So long as we can think that we can single out one group as "the problem," then we can feel dispensed from having to face the complexity of all that's

involved with our economy, and dispensed, as well, from seeing whereby “we” collectively may be part of the problem.

Jesus is revealed as the “light to the nations,” so that in that dark thicket of accusation, recrimination, envy, jealousy and rage, where so often our real motivations are hidden even from ourselves, His light might shine to give us a clarity of vision, just to see things as they really are. It seems so simple, but it is the very thing that proves to be most elusive. Let us pray that we can walk in His light, that we can see the light, and that we can be the light for others, that we never be part of any group that profits at the exclusion of some “other.”