

Today we begin the Season of Ordinary Time. *Ordinary Time* signifies that no special liturgical focus, like Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter or Pentecost, is being celebrated now. Yet, this time is spiritually rich. It presents us with the opportunity to reflect more deeply on the things Jesus taught and did during the time of His public ministry.

From this reflection, we can come to a deeper understanding of who Jesus is, what He did for us, and what it means to live as one of His followers. This is one of the reasons the dominant colour of this season of the Church is green, the colour of hope and the colour of growth.

In today's Gospel, the long-awaited moment has finally come. John the Baptist, with excitement, now declares to the people of Judah, "*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" How John's heart must have overflowed with joy and gratitude! His mission is now completed as he testifies to the *Lamb of God*. The Holy Spirit reveals Jesus to John the Baptist in a dramatic and deep way, and it changes his life.

When he calls Jesus, the "*Lamb of God*," John the Baptist fulfills the Scriptures that speak of the Messiah as a lamb. Jesus is the "*lamb that is led to the slaughter*" (Isaiah 53:2). Jesus is also the One destined "*to take away the sin of the world.*"

"*Behold the Lamb of God!*" Why is Jesus called a lamb, and not a horse or a tiger or a goat? Why does the Book of Revelation portray Jesus as a "*lamb standing as if slain*" (5:6)? Why must the Mass proclaim Him as the "*Lamb of God*"? It's because only a sacrificial lamb fits God's divine pattern of our salvation.

We need to know what the Lamb is, and why we call Jesus the "*Lamb of God.*" Turning back the pages of Scripture, in the Book of Genesis God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. He says, "*Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains*" (Genesis 22:2).

Going up the mountain, Isaac says to his father, "*The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*" Abraham replies, "*God Himself will provide*

*the lamb for a burnt offer, my son”* (Genesis 22:2-8). The Lamb to be provided foreshadows Jesus Christ who will be sacrificed for the sins of the world.

For over fifteen hundred years, the people having been waiting for God to provide the lamb for the offering. Can you hear the excitement of the people when John says that the lamb of sacrifice they have been waiting for is now in their midst?

The Catholic Church would later look upon the story of Abraham and Isaac as an allegory for the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross. Jesus, like Isaac, is a faithful father’s only beloved son. Like Isaac, Jesus carries uphill the wood for His own sacrifice, which will be completed on a hill in Jerusalem. The hill where Jesus dies on is the same hill where Abraham built his altar to sacrifice his only son, Issac.

But the pivotal sacrifice in Israel’s history is the Passover, which precipitated the Israelites’ flight from Egypt. It is the Passover when God instructs each Israelite family to take an unblemished lamb without broken bones, kill it, and sprinkle its blood on the doorpost with a hyssop branch. That night, the Israelites are to eat the lamb. If they do, their firstborn child will be spared. If they do not, their firstborn child will die in the night, along with all the firstborn in their flocks (Exodus 12:1-23). The Passover is an act of redemption for the people.

The Lord tells the Israelites to commemorate the Passover every year, and He even gives them the words they should use to explain the ritual to future generations: *“When your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover, for He passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when He slew the Egyptians”* (Exodus 12:26-27).

We know that Jesus observed the Jewish laws regarding the sacrifice. He celebrated the Passover every year in Jerusalem and He ate the sacrificed lamb, first with His family and later with His Apostles. Consuming the lamb was the only way a faithful Jew could renew his or her covenant with God.

But the Passover has more than an ordinary importance in Jesus’ life, it is central to His mission. Jesus *is* the sacrificial Lamb. St. John notes in his Gospel that when Jesus stands before Pilate *“it was the day of preparation of the Passover; it was about the sixth hour”* (19:14). St. John knows the sixth hour is when the priest is beginning to slaughter the Passover lambs. This is the moment of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

The Messiah announced by the prophets is described as a lamb who goes silently to the slaughter, to take the sins of His people upon Himself and wipe them away.

St. John recounts that none of Jesus' bones are broken on the cross, "*that the Scripture might be fulfilled*" (19:36). In the same passage, St. John notes that a centurion gives Jesus sour wine from a sponge on a hyssop branch. Hyssop is the branch prescribed by the Law for the Passover sprinkling of the lamb's blood. This action marks the fulfillment of the new and perfect redemption. And Jesus cries out, "*It is finished.*"

*What is finished?* When Jesus says, "*It is finished,*" He is not just referring to His life or His messianic mission. The old covenant God established with Moses is now finished. The people will now enter into a new covenant, the Holy Eucharist, the sacrifice of Christ's Body and Blood for the sin of the world. This new covenant will never be broken.

What does this mean to us today? How should we celebrate our new Passover? Thinking of how our ancestors commemorated their salvation by *partaking* of the Passover sacrifice, we are invited to reflect on how we *partake* of our salvation in the Eucharistic banquet, *the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*. The Mass is the celebration of our redemption in Christ. We are invited to remember what Jesus means to us as our own Paschal Lamb.

The banquet is *not* the Last Supper but the wedding feast of the Lamb of God in heaven where all of God's faithful people celebrate God's covenant of love and fidelity. That eternal banquet is our destiny because we are one with the Lamb of God in heaven. When you hear the words "*Lamb of God,*" reflecting on the richness of this title will help you to know Jesus better and lead you to fuller participation in the Eucharistic banquet.

St. Paul writes, "*Christ, our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival . . . with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth*" (1Corinthians 5:7-8). Our Passover lamb, Jesus, is the unleavened bread.

In our Eucharistic Prayer IV the priest takes the unleavened bread and prays, "*we offer You His Body and Blood, the sacrifice acceptable to You, which brings*

*salvation to the whole world.*” Our Passover festival is the Mass. We see that the Lamb of God, like the Passover lamb, is a worthy offering, a perfect fulfillment.

And it is here in the Mass that we receive the *Lamb of God in Holy Communion*. Those who partake of the Lamb of God will be spared. In St. John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “*Whoever eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life, and I will raise him [or her] up on the last day*” (6:53).

Every Sunday, just before we receive the Holy Eucharist, the priest, recalling the words of John the Baptist, invites you to “*Behold the Lamb of God; behold Him who takes away the sin of the world.*” He invites us to fix our eyes, our hearts, and our whole selves on Jesus. Jesus wants to open our eyes to *behold* Him so that we might know Him more deeply. So, when you receive Holy Communion today, make it a point to *behold* Jesus. Then ask Him to reveal Himself to you.

To *behold* Jesus is not a routine. It’s not just a fleeting moment when we are here at Mass. To *behold* Jesus involves focusing on Jesus, embracing what He has done for us, by sacrificing His life on the Cross so that we may have eternal life with Him. It involves remembering what your life would be like without Him.

Perhaps you have sung or recited the words a thousand times, “*Lamb of God, You take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.*” Just as many times you have seen the priest elevate the broken Host and proclaim, “*Behold the Lamb of God.*” *The Lamb of God is Jesus.*

It is here in the Mass where we partake of the Lamb of God, the New Covenant, broken and given to us in Holy Communion so that we may have eternal life in Him. This *New Covenant* is a bond that unites us to God the Father. We become witnesses to the *Lamb of God* whenever we are here at Mass. We are changed forever.