

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time A2026

In the Gospel of this morning we hear John the Baptist who was presenting our Lord to those around him exclaiming: "Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!"

For sure, everybody knows well how the Lamb, as an animal, played a big role in Jewish society. First of all, the liturgy in the temple was organized around the sacrifice of thanksgiving for the blessings received and for the forgiveness of sins. To fulfill that duty, the Israelites used a lamb as holocaust according to the recommendations of Exodus 29: 38-42.

By presenting our Lord as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, John the Baptist wants to say that Jesus is the replacement of all the sacrifices offered in the temple for the forgiveness of sins. He is the one who brings peace between God and the world. No more sacrifice is needed. His blood shed on the cross gives salvation to the world.

Moreover, the Lamb of God refers also to the event of Passover in Egypt. According to Exodus 12, the Israelites were saved thanks to the blood of the Lamb they sacrificed that night. As they were delivered from death by the blood of the Lamb, John sees in our Lord a true Lamb whose blood given on the cross purifies the world from sin and death.

Globally, the lamb, in the Bible is the symbol of being innocent; it cannot do evil to anyone but only suffer it. Following this symbolism, the first letter of Peter calls Christ "a spotless unblemished lamb" (1:19) who, "when he was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten" (2:23). In other words, Jesus is par excellence the innocent one who suffers.

It has been written that the suffering of the innocent "is the rock of atheism." After Auschwitz, the problem was posed in a still more acute way. There are countless books and dramas that have been written about this theme. It feels like being at a trial and hearing the voice of the judge ordering the defendant to stand up. The defendant in this case is God.

What does faith have to say about all this? First of all, it is necessary that all of us, believers and nonbelievers, adopt an attitude of humility, because if faith is not able to "explain" suffering, much less can the intellectual do.

The suffering of the innocent is something too pure and mysterious to try to close it up in one of our poor "explanations." Our Lord had suffered more than none of us. When he was faced with the suffering of the widow of Naim or the sisters of Lazarus, he knew nothing better to do than to be moved and weep.

The Christian response to the problem of innocent suffering is wrapped up in one name: Jesus Christ! Jesus did not come to give us expert explanations about suffering; he came rather to silently take it upon himself.

Taking it upon himself, however, he changed it entirely; from a sign of malediction, he made it an instrument of redemption. Even more: he made it the supreme value, the highest order of greatness in this world. The true greatness of the human creature is measured by the fact of bearing both the guilt and the punishment without defection. It is that type of suffering that brings us closer to God. Only God, in fact, if he suffers, suffers as innocent in an absolute sense.

Our Lord did not only give a meaning to innocent suffering, he also conferred a new power on it, a mysterious fruitfulness. Look at what flowed from the suffering of Christ: the resurrection and hope for the whole human race.

But look also at what happens around us. How much energy and heroism is often brought out in a couple in the acceptance of a handicapped child that is laying there, in wheelchair for years! How much unsuspected solidarity surrounds them! How much otherwise unknown capacity to love!

The most important thing, however, when we speak of innocent suffering, is not to explain it; or to increase it with our actions and our omissions, but also try to relieve the innocent suffering that exists!

Faced with a little girl frozen by the cold, who cries because of hunger pains, a man cried out in his heart one day to God: "Oh, God, where are you? Why don't you do something for that innocent girl?" And God answered him: "I certainly have done something for her: I made you!"

Be the reason why someone finds a motive to live and be happy. Like Martin Luther King we will celebrate tomorrow, be the reason why someone is joyful and keeps hoping in a better future made up of justice for all, peace, unity and end to violence.

(Adapted from the Homily given by Fr Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap, on Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, January 18, 2008.)

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



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