



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

## Christus Paradox

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 1, 2022*

*The Third Sunday of Easter*

*Based on Acts 9:1-6; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19*

*Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world,  
have mercy on us.*

*Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world,  
grant us peace.*

*Amen.*

If you are fortunate enough to attend a full performance of Handel's *Messiah*, you'll discover that it is about more than just the birth of Christ. After the sprightly strains of "For unto us a child born," the sweeping oratorio goes on to tell the full story of Jesus' life from his teaching and healing to his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. Once Jesus is safely ensconced in heaven, *Messiah* lauds the great "company of preachers" who spread "glad tidings...unto the ends of the world" before it erupts into the familiar triumph of the *Hallelujah* chorus, which announces Christ's reign over all as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Many an audience member can be seen slipping out of the church or concert hall in the wake of the *Hallelujah* chorus—by this point, depending on the length of any intermission, the oratorio has been going for nearly two hours—but *Messiah's* best-known movement does not mark the end of Handel's great work. The Third Part of Handel's *Messiah*, which follows the *Hallelujah* chorus, outlines the glorious consequences that result from Christ's defeat of death and sin. Now that Christ has been risen, we, his fellow human beings, will rise, too: "for as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive...we shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet...death is swallowed up in victory." At the very end of the piece, the choir and orchestra form a wall of sound and take on the role of the saints and angels in heaven and on earth who unite in songs of praise: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by his blood, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing. Blessing and honor, glory and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen."

It's long been my favorite movement in *Messiah*, a fittingly exquisite conclusion to what is justifiably the most loved of all long choral works. The Amen alone is enough to make you weep. But only recently did it occur to me just how strange the text that the choir sings is. In the high court of heaven, the one who reigns above all that has existed and will exist is not a human person or a straightforwardly supernatural being. The one who deserves and deservedly receives endless power and wealth and glory is a mere animal, and not an animal at the top of a food chain, like a lion or a bear or a Tyrannosaurus Rex, but a humble sheep—in fact, a baby sheep, a lamb. A lamb that was slaughtered, mortally wounded, split open and exposed—a damaged, helpless, astonishingly meek creature—rules over the universe and inherits everything.

Lambs, of course, play an important role throughout the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures, commonly called The Old Testament, faithful people routinely sacrifice lambs as a way of displaying their devotion to the Almighty and atoning for their sins and other transgressions. In the book of Exodus, each Israelite household is asked to slaughter a lamb on the evening prior to their departure from Egypt. After killing their lambs, the Israelites spread their lambs' blood over the entrances to their houses in order to signal to God that he should pass them over and spare their firstborn children from death. Following a command from God, made before even the first Passover was complete, Israelites would go on to repeat the same sacrifice in future years, and such Passover sacrifices continue to take place in Jewish communities to this day.

The earliest Christians, making use of the symbols and ideas provided by their Jewish forebears, saw Jesus himself as a lamb offered to God. One of the Gospels includes a scene in which John the Baptist proclaims that Jesus "is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul announces that "our [Passover] lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed." The first letter of Peter asserts that we, as followers of Christ, have been "ransomed...with [Christ's] precious blood...like that of a lamb without defect or blemish." However, it is only in the Revelation to John the Divine, the book from which the text of *Messiah's* final movement is derived and the book from which today's second lesson came, that the Lamb becomes a main character, and it is only in the Revelation to John the Divine that the Lamb is an all-powerful authority and the focus of such total adulation and praise.

It goes without saying that Revelation's vision of Christ as Lamb is a paradox. The one who serves as shepherd is himself a sheep. The one who holds all the power is himself the most powerless of figures. The one who is weakest and most vulnerable defeats the strongest of adversaries and prevails over every enemy. But, in depicting Christ as a Lamb, Revelation does not merely invert our understanding of who is in possession of power. In calling attention to Jesus' wounds—the very fact that Christ as lamb has been slaughtered—Revelation also challenges our beliefs about how power should ideally be exercised.

Jesus, you see, is a passive hero. The most important event in Jesus' life is not one that he incites but one that happens to him. Jesus is the lamb that was *slain*. He is the object, not the subject, of the slaying. He redeems humanity because of the death that is foisted upon him. He is worthy of adoration as a result of the injuries that others inflict. Jesus receives power and honor and glory and blessing not by acting but by being acted upon. As Lamb of God, Jesus manages to surrender control while simultaneously ascending to the ultimate heights of all creation. By giving up power, he gains it; by choosing to be vulnerable, he makes himself strong; by dying, he defeats death itself.

We follow Jesus when we choose to embrace the paradox he embodied, when we step back from the boardrooms and the limelight, when we turn away from pomp and privilege, when we let others call the shots, when we loosen our grip on all that makes us feel safe and secure, when we strip off our defenses and pour ourselves out for the glory of God and the flourishing of the world. Christ the Lamb, our paradoxical Savior, will shock and daze us; he will confront and convict and disturb; he will take us where we do not want to go. But he will fill our nets so that they are teeming with fish. He will empower us to feed those who hunger for better food and better lives. He will turn tears into laughter and stir us to dance with holy joy. He will bestow us with blessings beyond our wildest dreams.

The Canadian hymnwriter Sylvia Dunstan lived a beautiful but tragically brief life, succumbing to cancer in 1993 at the young age of 38. In her reverent and highly original hymns, she helped twentieth century Christians see old concepts in new ways.

One evening, she was riding the bus home from the jail where she served as chaplain when she decided to put pen to paper and write a new hymn. It had been "a particularly bad day" at work, though how exactly

the day had been bad is left to our imaginations.<sup>1</sup> Had she felt especially useless and ineffective? Had she found a specific inmate resistant to her outreach? Had she experienced a conflict with another staff member? Had she become depressed about the reality of crime or frustrated at the injustice of a system that tried—so poorly—to address it? Had she wondered why in the world God had called her to do this terribly difficult job?

Whatever the circumstances of her life and her musings about those circumstances, the outcome of her thinking was the hymn we sang before the Gospel. The hymn was influenced, Dunstan later wrote, by her long-standing interest in Søren Kierkegaard and his work—work that Dunstan had read—on the paradoxical nature of the Christian faith. Dunstan called her hymn “Christus Paradox.”

You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd.  
You, Lord, are both prince and slave.  
You, peacemaker and sword-bringer  
Of the way you took and gave.  
You the everlasting instant;  
You, whom we both scorn and crave.

Clothed in light upon the mountain,  
Stripped of might upon the cross,  
Shining in eternal glory,  
Beggared by a soldier's toss,  
You, the everlasting instant;  
You, who are both gift and cost.

You, who walk each day beside us,  
Sit in power at God's side.  
You, who preach a way that's narrow,  
Have a love that reaches wide.  
You, the everlasting instant;  
You, who are our pilgrim guide.

Worthy is our earthly Jesus!  
Worthy is our cosmic Christ!  
Worthy your defeat and victory.  
Worthy still your peace and strife.  
You, the everlasting instant;  
You, who are our death and life.<sup>2</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Dunstan, *In Search of Hope and Grace: 40 Hymns and Gospel Songs*. More information about “You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd” can be found in Joan Halmo’s article for the journal *The Hymn*

(<https://hymnary.org/files/articles/Halmo%2C%20You%20Lord%20are%20Both%20Lamb%20and%20Shepherd.pdf>).

<sup>2</sup> A previous sermon of mine, preached at St. Paul’s on the Green in Norwalk, CT on April 22, 2018, was also called *Christus Paradox* and also ended with Dunstan’s hymn. The sermons share some thematic material, but most of the content is different. The earlier sermon can be read here: <https://www.stpaulsnorwalk.org/christian-paradox-april-22-2018/> .