

Knox Uniting Church Cluster.

Sunday January 18th 2026 – (RCL: Year A. Second Sunday of Epiphany)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Rowville Uniting Service

Bible passages: Isaiah 49:1-7 and John 1:29-42 (NRSVUE)

“A dove, a Lamb and an Invitation”

INTRODUCTION TO THEME (EARLY WORD / PREAMBLE):

In our gospel reading today there are three things about Jesus that stand out. One is the description of him by John the Baptist as the “Lamb of God”. It’s a term we may use a lot, but what does it mean? There are actually many interpretations of this term – all biblical in their own ways. So, let’s think about what ‘lamb of God’ might mean in this context. John also describes Jesus as the one upon whom the Spirit came down from heaven like a dove and remain on him. What does this mean? Finally, after John’s testimony about the Dove and the Lamb, Jesus himself comes along to John and some others with him, with an invitation to follow him. What is the nature of this invitation? How can we apply this to our own lives?

MESSAGE:

I’ve got a corny dad-joke for you which you’ve probably heard before. A minister was doing a children’s talk in church. He says, “Hey kids, I’m going to describe something to you, and you have to guess the answer. It’s furry. It has a long tail. And it has strong legs so it can hop around. What is it?” The kids all look blankly at him. He’s surprised because the answer should be really easy. Eventually one kid puts up his hand tentatively, and says, “It really sounds like a kangaroo, but I know the answer must be the ‘Jesus’”.

The answer is always ‘Jesus’, right? That’s what we are programmed to believe from a very young age! (if we’ve grown up in church). And it’s a pretty good answer. You can’t go wrong. Except when the real answer is ‘a kangaroo’!

Well, I have a similar question for you today. What do a dove, a lamb and an invitation all have in common? Jesus! Correct answer! More specifically the answer is that those three things say something about Jesus in our particular gospel reading today from John 1. Let’s take a look at each thing and try to apply them in our own lives.

1. A Dove

John the Baptist said, “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him [Jesus]” (v32). Although baptism is not specifically mentioned in John, it is assumed this took place during Jesus’ baptism. What is the significance of the dove? In everyday use, a dove, especially a white dove, can symbolise peace, love, purity, freedom, new beginnings and more. You may have been to a wedding where white doves were released as the newlywed couple emerge from the chapel – to represent those kinds of meanings.

In Christianity, the dove, of course, is one of the things used to represent the Holy Spirit. (Others being wind, fire, water, etc). In today’s story the Holy Spirit is seen to be like a dove descending on Jesus. (this is mentioned in all four gospels). The general understanding of this is that the dove is identifying the One being chosen and anointed by God, and the One who is filled with the Holy Spirit, in preparation for his public ministry, which began very soon after Jesus’ baptism.

As followers of Jesus we, too are chosen and anointed and given his Spirit. As Paul writes in Ephesians 1:13, the Holy Spirit is *promised* to us and is like a *mark* or a *seal* upon us. And this mark on us should give us great assurance for it means God is always present, always helping, guiding, empowering us in life. So, the dove is not just for Jesus. It’s for all of us.

2. A Lamb

Twice in this passage, John the Baptist points at Jesus and declares, “Look, the Lamb of God” (v29, 36). No-where else in John or the other gospels is this phrase used of Jesus, although we do encounter the Christ figure portrayed as a ‘lamb’ in Revelation (Rev 5:6). Although not a biblically common title for Jesus, we seem to use it quite a bit in our songs and liturgy, don’t we? We use it to describe Jesus, as the sacrificial lamb, being our means of atonement for sin and our redemption, to use two theological terms, which themselves need a lot of unpacking.

But in reality, ‘Lamb of God’ can be interpreted in many ways. Even in John’s gospel, which typically has many layers of meaning, this term might mean different things. Some common meanings include Jesus as ‘suffering servant’, ‘innocent victim’, or ‘our substitute’. All interrelated but subtly different.

In Revelation, Jesus the Lamb is simultaneously Jesus the ‘Lion’ (see ‘lion of Judah’ in Rev 5:5). This is the all-conquering, apocalyptic, triumphal ‘lamb’ – quite a contrast to the lowly, humble image we might be used to. It is possible that John the Baptist imagined the ‘triumphal’ lamb in our story, which wasn’t quite the kind of lamb we see Jesus becoming throughout the rest of the gospel story.

Rather we see (in John and other gospels) Jesus more as the lamb, whose life of servanthood, sacrifice and ultimately his shed blood – the result of his way of life - frees us. In this sense Jesus becomes the ‘Paschal lamb’ or ‘Passover lamb’, as in the story of the Passover (in Exodus 12) which resulted in the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and to a new life of freedom.

Personally, I feel this is the best way to understand Jesus as the Lamb of God. The idea of Jesus as a substitute who pays the penalty for our sins, may have truth in it, but the trap there is that we are ‘off the hook’. We don’t have to really take sin too seriously because ‘Jesus takes care of it all in our place’. This view can distract us from the deeper call to a life of sacrifice and surrender that fully embraces hardship, servanthood and suffering, as the *very pathway* to the freedom we find in the ‘Lamb of God’. This deeper call leads me to the third thing that we see in Jesus in this text:

3. An Invitation

In today’s story, when John says “Look, the Lamb of God”, two of his disciples apparently leave John and follow Jesus. One of the two is named as Andrew, brother of Simon-Peter, who later brings his brother to Jesus. This is quite a different scenario to the way Peter and Andrew, as fisherman were called to leave their nets in other gospel accounts (cf Mark 1:16-18). But what stands out in John’s version is Jesus’ penetrating question, in verse 38 to the two would-be followers, “What do you want?” This deeply probing, searching question forces the disciples to think and reply with their own question, “Where are you staying?” (v38).

“Where are you staying?” This is not just about where Jesus is physically located. It’s a question meaning that they want to truly ‘be with’ Jesus – to *abide* with him; *learn* from him; *enjoy* a close connection with him; truly *journey* with him. This needs to be our deepest desire in following him as well.

Yet this ‘abiding’ with Jesus is not going to be all roses and sunshine, as comforting as the abiding might be. When Jesus replies again with, “Come...and you will see” (v39) it’s a call to be with him in all the tough stuff as well as the joys. It’s a call to sacrificial discipleship and suffering.

And this is the call to us today as well. But let’s remember the dove - the Spirit is always with us. As Jesus would later in John say to his disciples, they will not be left alone [as orphans] for he leaves his Spirit with them, who will be with them forever. (John 14:15-18). This is the Spirit who both comforts and empowers us through all the challenges of life.

This invitation to follow is also a *sending* into mission. In our Isaiah reading, it starts with the line, "Listen to me you coastlands". The message from God is not just for his people Israel. It extends to the 'coastlands', meaning the 'ends of the earth' – to the most far away places. Like in the movie, 'Shrek', which has an enchanted kingdom called 'Far Far Away' - a place to which Shrek must journey to, we are invited to take God's message to 'Far Far Away' places.

In Isaiah 49 it talks about being God's 'servant' (v5) to be the a 'light to the Gentiles', bringing 'salvation to the ends of the earth' (v6). This is the second of four 'servant songs' in Isaiah (the first one being last week's reading from Isaiah 42), and it could well be talking about the coming of Jesus who personally took on that mission. But equally it could be talking about the call to us to be 'servants' who take the message to distant lands.

But how are we to understand 'distant lands' today? Who are the people in the 'coastlands'?

I believe this can be anyone on the margins of society – for whatever reason – poverty, lack, displacement, violence, poor health – whatever. And people on the margins are not necessarily those who are a long way away. They can be right on our doorstep. As Jesus' own mission was to those on the margins, so it must be ours as we follow him.

But there is another side to the coin here. Sometimes we find ourselves living in the coastlands – on the margins. We feel left out, alone, afraid, unwell, trapped, unable to belong. And then *we are* the ones in need of the hope in the message of Christ.

So, Jesus' invitation to 'come and see' has two sides to it for us. It's a call to sacrificial discipleship which takes us to the margins. And at the same time, it's a call to deep belonging, inclusion and love when we, ourselves feel on the margins. And in both cases the call is taking us to life in all its fullness and all its freedom.