

## Peace Sunday 2024 Alternative Homily

Those strange words that John the Baptist says at the start of today's Gospel - "Look, there is the lamb of God!" - what do you make of them? We might be tempted to imagine that they are some sort of definition, as clear as anything, which those disciples would have understood immediately. For ourselves, gathered in church at a Sunday Eucharist almost 2,000 years later, they may have a certain clarity. We recognise them as the words we hear immediately before communion - and we know how to reply: "Lord, I am not worthy ..." Theologians, too, may suggest some clear answers of their own, drawing on the biblical record to outline what the Baptist might have been referring to: the lamb of sacrifice, the Passover lamb, the innocent (and yet exalted and powerful) lamb of the Apocalypse ... John the Evangelist evidently thought these words were clear by the time he sat down to edit his Gospel towards the end of the first Christian century.

And yet perhaps the point is that they're not clear. These words are a question-mark, the beginning of a search. The two disciples certainly respond in that way, following Jesus to the point that he turns and asks them, "What do you want?" And they in turn ask him, "Rabbi, where do you live?" And they end up going to spend the rest of that day with him. Then they go and tell others what they've found. Then it's Simon's turn to come before Jesus with his questions and to have his own identity redefined. "And Jesus looked hard at him" - and recognised in him something which Simon himself had not yet perceived: "You are to be called Cephas (meaning Rock)."

The whole drama of this text is about relationship, specifically our relationship with Jesus. It is about our Christian faith that it is in him that we find our true identity. We are all here because we have received, somewhere in our own story, the invitation to spend time with him. We have recognised (whether dramatically or in subtle ways which we can scarcely put into words) that in our encounter with the Lord we meet our true self. Here we find our true calling (just as Simon does). Jesus speaks to our hearts. Somehow, amidst the noise and confusion of so much of contemporary life, here is a message that is life-giving, a person who can be trusted, a love that is inexhaustible: the Lamb of God, the Messiah, whatever words we choose; the One who prompts in us the question: "Where do you live?" The One who says, "Come and see."

Today is 'Peace Sunday', the day each year when the whole Catholic Community is invited to reflect upon how our encounter with this Lamb, the Innocent One who died that we might live, commissions us to work for peace and justice in our world. Each year, Pope Francis gives us a theme for our prayer and reflection. And this year's theme may seem a bit too abstract or technical for us to grasp: *'Artificial*

*intelligence and peace*'. Yet that title certainly alerts us to the new threats that are facing us on the world stage and in our own homes.

Artificial intelligence - which we have all encountered as the use of CGI in films, the robotic voice greeting us at the call centre, the algorithms delivering content to our mobile phones and in many other ways - is changing both the world around us and our own ways of interacting with that world. At the personal level we know how conversations on social media so easily turn toxic and confrontational. We have encountered various - perhaps quite innocent - ways of 'faking it', photoshopping pictures to remove 'imperfections', projecting carefully curated images of 'my best life', blurring the distinction between truth and falsehood.

But there are other more disturbing developments - the threat of cyber-attacks, phishing and data-mining, 'fake news' and 'deep-fake' videos showing things which never happened, some of them generated by 'state actors' to further their agendas. And there is also the more directly military harnessing of these technologies. There are 'Autonomous Fighting Vehicles' which could decide who lives and who dies on the battlefield without any human agent being involved. And there are early-warning systems capable of triggering a nuclear war unless they are kept under human oversight.

Pope Francis is calling us to wake up to the dangers around us and to debate the ethics of these technologies now, before it is too late. And after that we can flip the question around: how can AI become a servant of peace? Only by those who develop and control it programming it to seek conflict resolution, not military victory; peace, not violence. In war, as Pope Francis tells us repeatedly, everyone loses. In following the Lamb of God, peace wins.

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