

In today's gospel Jesus is given the title 'Lamb of God'. This is only ever said in the writings of John: his gospel of course, and the Book of Revelation, which was probably not written by John himself, but a member of the early Christian community that grew up around him. This title is not found in the Old Testament – or anywhere else in the New Testament – but it refers to the old Jewish tradition of sacrificing a lamb for take away sins. It shows that Jesus is the sacrifice who takes away the sins of the world.

But there are other ways of thinking about and understanding Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. No one way is true or right or correct, but together, these ways picture a mystery that is beyond all thinking and understanding.

St Catherine of Siena said that even before we came into existence, we were in God's mind and we were loved. Did we return that love? No – because we were not conscious. We had to become separate from him before we could love him back. Like a child in its mother's womb: she loves it with all her heart, but it cannot return her love because it is not conscious. It has to be separated from her first by being born. And with our birth, we enter a world of mixed blessings: love, joy and beauty, yes, but also ugliness, pain and suffering. The purpose of this life is to return to God in consciousness, and be joined with him in a union of eternal love.

The equation is terribly simple: to return and be united with God in love means we have first to be separated from him. We have to be born into this world. And separation can involve terrible suffering – not least the suffering we cause each other. The end is eternal joy, so the question we have to ask is: Is it worth it? Are the tears of an abandoned or abused child worth the price of this eternal joy? Is the whipped and beaten and tortured animal worth that price? Of course, the sensible answer is no, it is not. I've struggled with this question for a long time.

Then, in recent years, I have thought of the crucifixion, and I have said to myself: actually, the price has already been paid. In the Passion and death of Jesus, God himself has experienced every pain and suffering in the world then, now and in the future: from the tears of a child to the darkness of the holocaust. God knows it because God has suffered it in Christ Jesus. It wasn't just a crucifixion, it was an intimate undergoing of every possible pain of the world.

In Isaiah God says: 'I hate your sacrifices and holocausts – they stink!' He was talking about slaughtering lambs to take away sin. But for me, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Jesus on the cross, is not so much the price of sin: Jesus dying on the cross is the price not of sin – but of love.