

In Matthew 6:7, Jesus warns us: “When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.” This is a warning against thinking we can wear God down by repeating a prayer time after time. Yet, in the *Agnus Dei*, we essentially repeat the same thing three times. Why is this?

The *Agnus Dei* was first created to fulfill a blatantly practical purpose. Originally, the Lord’s Supper was celebrated using one or more loaves of bread that were donated that morning. So, once the bread was consecrated, the pastors needed time to break the bread into enough pieces for all the communicants. This could take some time, so, in the 7th Century, the *Agnus Dei* was created. Originally it was repeated as many times as necessary to fill the time. When they were ready, the celebrant, or pastor leading the Lord’s Supper, would signal the choir director to move into the final verse. Then, the last verse, being different, signaled to everyone that they were ready to move on with the service.

Of course, this is no longer an issue, because we have individual wafers. Today we don’t need to fill time while the pastor breaks up the bread. This is why it has been shortened to 3 verses. Three was chosen to remind us of the Trinity.

Yet, there is another, lasting purpose that it fulfills. This is a theological purpose for the *Agnus Dei*. It points us to exactly who and what we are about to receive in the Sacrament.

The *Agnus Dei* is a call, a prayer, to Jesus to have mercy on us and give us peace. But, it is framed in a curious way. To understand this, we need to look behind it to the text it comes from. The main words come from John 1:29 where John the Baptist points to Jesus and says: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes

away the sin of the world!” From this we get the name of this song, as *Agnus Dei* is Latin for Lamb of God.

But to fully understand the *Agnus Dei*, we need to know what lays behind what John was saying. What does he mean by the “the Lamb of God?” This refers back to the Exodus, and Passover Lamb. When God rescued the people of Israel from slavery, He sent plagues on Egypt. The Israelites were automatically spared from most of the plagues. But, the last plague was different. God sent His avenger, the Angel of Death to kill the firstborn of every household in Egypt. God warned them “every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the cattle” (Exo 11:5). No-one would be automatically spared, no matter what their status.

However, God also provided protection for His people. They had to slaughter a lamb and put its blood on the door of the house. Therefore, the lamb died so that the household might be spared. The blood stood as a marker that a death already occurred there. This told the Angel of Death to move on and harm no-one in that house.

Then, at the start of Jesus’ ministry, John the Baptist points to Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Here John was giving us an insight into who Jesus is and what He would do. Jesus came to be the ultimate Passover Lamb.

John was also giving us an insight into who we are and what we need. You and I are much like the people of Israel in Moses’ day. While we are not bound in slavery, at least not to human taskmasters, we are controlled by sin. As Jesus put it: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin” (John

8:34). So, it is a simple test – have you ever done anything wrong? Just one example is enough to prove that you were born in bondage to sin.

Paul further explains in Romans 6:23 “the wages of sin is death.” This means that, sooner or later death is coming for each and every one of us. As the saying goes: “There is nothing certain in life but death and taxes.” Sometimes we can avoid taxes, but death comes to all. Again, Paul puts it this way: “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Rom 5:12). Notice, Paul says that “death spread to all men because all sinned.”

There is not a human being alive who can claim they are perfect. Which includes every one of us here. Think of yourself, of your own life. What sins have you committed? What areas of greed, self-indulgence or hatred have you harbored? What sorts of pride, arrogance, or looking down on others have you done? What improper thoughts of anger, coveting, or selfishness have you entertained?

While we like to think that these indiscretions are no big deal, they are. The wages of sin is death – no ifs, ands or buts. No minimums or limits. You sin, even one time, you deserve eternal death. And, if we are honest, not only have we sinned countless times, but we cannot stop sinning, no matter how hard we try. Oh, we might be able to limit one sin or another, but to stop altogether – it is impossible.

This means that, just like the ancient Israelites, the Angel of Death is headed for all mankind, including us.

And much like them, the only answer is found is in the blood of the Lamb. In the same way the Passover lamb died to save the people in that house, Jesus, the

Lamb of God, died to save us. In Jesus’ death we see all these things tied together.

First, we need to remember that in the ancient Jewish calendar a day starts at sunset. This applies to Jesus’ suffering in an important way.

Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples, on what we call Maundy Thursday – after sunset. That night He was arrested, and by the following afternoon He had been crucified and died. But, since the day, in the Jewish accounting, goes from sunset to sunset, this was still the first day of Passover.

This means that He was the True Passover Lamb. He was “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Yet, in that same Passover, Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to the disciples and said: “Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of me.” In the same way also He took the cup after supper, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying: “Drink of it, all of you; this cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”

And, according to these words of promise, He comes to us again in His body and blood. So, we welcome and praise Him who comes in the Sacrament singing “O Christ, thou Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” In fact, this is our response to the promise spoken by the pastor: “The peace of the Lord be with you always.”

When the pastor speaks this promise, after the Words of Institution, this is a blessing. However, this is not like the salutation where the pastor says, “The LORD be with you” and the congregation responds, “And with thy spirit.” Here there is no return blessing, rather it is accepted with a simple “Amen.”

The reason is that the peace we are talking about here comes through Jesus’ body and blood in the Sacrament. This is why I like to hold a piece of the host and the chalice when I say these words. This is to be a visible reminder that it is the Peace of the LORD, which is coming through Jesus Body and Blood in, with, and under the bread and wine. In the Sacrament, we get true peace with God, because we are being united with Jesus, and with His body “given for you” and His blood “shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”

So, we praise Him with the *Agnus Dei* and ask for the mercy He has promised us. The Passover Lamb was not only to be killed in the place of the firstborn, but it was to be eaten! So, with Jesus as the Ultimate Passover Lamb, we are called to eat His body and drink His blood.

It is Jesus’ sacrifice as our Passover Lamb that sets us free, not from slavery to taskmasters, be they Egyptian or otherwise, but to sin, itself. Sin is the ultimate taskmaster, taking over all of our lives. But, in Jesus, we are set free.

When Jesus comes to us, as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” He comes to have mercy on us and to give us real, lasting peace.