

# **The Seven "I AM"'s of John's Gospel**

## *Session 1*

### **Introduction to the Gospel**

Who wrote the Gospel of John? We don't know for sure. The evidence of the text itself suggests that it was written by one of Jesus' disciples, present at the last supper and the empty tomb. However the gospel never names him, only referring to him as the Beloved Disciple. Long-standing church tradition identifies him as John the son of Zebedee, one of the three apostles who, in the synoptic accounts, seem to form an inner circle among the Twelve, accompanying Jesus to the mountain of the Transfiguration or taken apart by him at Gethsemane. Others identify him with John the Elder of Ephesus, known to us from the early Christian writer Papias. Others still have attempted to identify him with other figures in the gospel story, such as Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany, but no such modern attempt has found many followers. A comparison of the style and themes of the Gospel with the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd letters of John has led many to think that the Gospel according to John was written by the same man as wrote those epistles, who just identifies himself as "the presbyter," the elder (and hence identified by some as John the Elder). I tend to align with the 'John the Elder' party, but recognise that we have little actual evidence to help us.

As we read these four texts, we can see that the author was a leader and spokesman of the apostolic church, trying to preserve his understanding of and teaching about Jesus. We can also tell from these four works that they were written to and for a community that had suffered from serious internal disagreements about the legacy of the Beloved Disciple. Above all, we can see that he was a beautiful and poetic writer and a profound theologian. Whoever the Beloved Disciple may have been, he had clearly meditated, taught, and preached for many years on certain key incidents, conversations, and teachings by Jesus.

The gospel that he produced is divided into four sections:

- the Prologue (Jn 1.1-18);
- the Book of Signs (Jn 1.19-12.50);
- the Book of Glory (Jn 13.1-20.31); and
- the Epilogue (Jn 21).

The key to the Beloved Disciple's vision of Jesus and his mission, can be found in the prologue. Like Mark, John begins his gospel at the beginning. In fact he goes back to the very beginning, the creation of the world, by echoing the first words of the Bible, Genesis 1.1, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The unique relationship between Jesus and the Father, which is revealed to us slowly over the course of the other gospels, here springs out at us from the start. Jesus is the Word made flesh, God's only son, as well as being Christ, the messiah, a human being. This prologue is thought to combine a hymn popular in the community with the familiar story of John the Baptist, thus juxtaposing two beginnings, the beginning of creation and the beginning of Jesus' story. Beyond the story of the Word and the story of John the Baptist, though, the

prologue weaves in a third story, how believers are transformed by the Word, but only after the Word becomes human.

It is vital to our understanding of the gospel that we see how it blends the two levels of reality. For the elder and his community, it is essential to keep before our eyes that Jesus is simultaneously both "God's only Son, he who is nearest to the Father's heart" and a man from Nazareth who gets thirsty after a hot and dusty walk and cries when his good friend Lazarus dies. In fact Jesus' unique existence as God and Man makes possible what he has come to do. As the prologue says, "to those who put their trust in him, he gave the right to become children of God, born not of human stock, by the physical desire of a human father, but of God." So God's son somehow makes it possible for those who put their trust in him to become sons and daughters of God in turn. Over the course of the Gospel, "I am" sayings are one of the ways in which the elder keeps Jesus' unique nature before our eyes, forcing us to be aware of his divine nature, his God-ness.

### **Significance of "I AM"**

In the Greek Bible, "I am" ("ego eimi" in Greek) can either be what it appears to be, a simple verb introducing a statement about oneself or one's identity, or an echo of the divine name "YHWH." In Exodus 3, Moses encounters a bush ablaze at Horeb, the mountain of God, in the middle of the wilderness in which he is sheep-herding for his father-in-law Jethro. A voice speaks to him out of the fire, the voice of God giving him a mission to free the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. Moses asks for a sign to give to people when they challenge him -- "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God

of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?". God's answer is to reveal his true name YHWH for the first time -- as NRSV renders it, "I AM WHO I AM" -- and God continues "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you'". So in the Hebrew Bible, both in the original language and in Hebrew translation, "I am" is often found in theophanies, stories of God's revelation to God's people, as in Exodus 12.12, where God declares, "I am the LORD" as part of his commands to keep the passover.

John's Gospel contains two groups of Seven I AM sayings that fall into these two categories, either figurative statements about Jesus and his identity or apparent reflections of Old Testament theophanies, a usage markedly different from that of the other gospels. We will look at two "I AM" sayings that echo the divine name YHWH (John 6.20 and John 18.5), and then move on to study the first set of seven I AM sayings over the remaining five sessions.

### ***John 6.16-21***

When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.

## **Focus**

Although Jesus appears simply to identify himself in response to their fear -- don't worry, it's me! -- he may be doing something more. By echoing the language of divine revelation in the Hebrew Bible he is offering more than reassurance, especially since this lake crossing comes immediately after John's account of the loaves and fishes (John 6.1-14). Many interpreters see that meal as a foreshadowing of the so-called eschatological feast, a meal offered by God to God's people in the last days.

- What effect does the possibility that this statement is a theophany have on our understanding of the loaves and fishes?
- On our understanding of the disciples' relation with Jesus?

## ***John 18.1-6***

"After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus replied, 'I am he.' Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. 'When Jesus said to them, 'I am he', they stepped back and fell to the ground."

## **Focus**

In Greek, Jesus' reply is simply, "ego eimi", I am. So he is both answering the implied question, "which of you is Jesus of Nazareth?" and proclaiming that he is God. The statement that the soldiers and police (fellow Jews rather than Roman soldiers) stepped back and fell to the ground underlines the second meaning, because this is an appropriate reaction to finding themselves unexpectedly in the presence of what is holy. Moses removed his sandals and hid his face from the sight of God when he realised Who was speaking to him from the burning bush. Unfortunately the soldiers and police quickly "come to their senses" as the everyday reasserts itself and go on to arrest Jesus.

- What does this say about our human encounters with God?
- How can we overcome the tendency to come to our senses?

We will look in detail at the seven most famous of the I AM sayings in John over the next four sessions, those in which Jesus speaks of himself in figurative ways that nevertheless say something important about his identity and purpose.

## *Session 2*

### **The Good Shepherd (John 10.11-18)**

The other gospel writers portray Jesus using parables in which God's kingdom is compared to many objects or situations in then-daily life, so as to teach something about the kingdom and, most importantly, about God. The Old Testament writers also use parables to convey the prophetic message that has been entrusted to them. In John, on the other hand, Jesus never speaks of the kingdom of God except in his discussion with Nicodemus in chapter 3. However, two "I AM"s identify Jesus himself with two of the most important images which scripture uses to talk about God and the Kingdom, a shepherd and a vineyard. Tonight we will look at John 10.11-18 (the good shepherd) and in our next session, John 15.1-11 (the true vine).

In the parable recorded in the synoptic gospels, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a shepherd caring for his lost sheep. In the book of Ezekiel, God takes on the role of shepherd, in deliberate contrast to the leaders of Israel, who are shown to have been false shepherds. It is with that prophetic image partly in mind, no doubt, that Jesus declares here that he is the *good* shepherd.

#### ***John 10.11-18***

‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired

hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

### **Focus**

- In this passage, Jesus contrasts the shepherd with the hired hand who runs away while the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. What are other differences? How can we recognise the hired hand?
- Jesus also compares his knowledge of the sheep and theirs of him with the knowledge the Father and the Son have for each other. How do we as sheep know our shepherd? What does it say about our knowledge of him and our relationship to him to make this comparison with the Trinity?
- Who are the other sheep, not of this fold? How does he bring them in?

### *Session 3*

#### **The True Vine (John 15.1-11)**

Like the figure of the shepherd, the vine and the vineyard are important images throughout Scripture for God's people and his Kingdom. Here (unlike the good shepherd saying we read last time), Jesus uses an image in which the Father also plays a part. Although the Father figures as the grower, or at least the owner, of the vine in the parables and the Old Testament, here the symbolism of the vine itself is utterly different.

#### ***John 15.1-11***

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said

these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

### **Focus**

- Here the vine is Jesus himself, rather than Israel, as is usual in the parables and the Old Testament, and God's people (specifically, the disciples at the last supper, to whom this saying is addressed) are the branches engrafted into the vine. How does it change our perspective to have the centre of the image shift from us as God's vineyard to Jesus as our source of life?
- By using such an organic image, Jesus focussed our attention on the divine life that we can share just as the branches share the life of the vine. But to do so, we must abide in him, abide in his love. What does that involve? How can we abide in him and his love?
- What is the fruit that we will bear? How does it glorify the Father?
- This seems to be an odd time for Jesus to be talking about joy -- what does it mean here?

## *Session 4*

### **Jesus as Portal and Path (John 10.1-10 and 14.1-7)**

These passages lack neat parallels or comparisons in the rest of the Bible, so let's look at them each on its own.

#### *John 10.1-10*

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'"

#### **Focus**

When his audience doesn't understand the parable of the shepherd, he changes tactics and uses a new approach, the I AM saying about the gate.

- What is the difference between the shepherd and the gate here?
- How do these two images shape the I AM saying about the Good Shepherd that follows and that we discussed in our second session?
- What does it mean to be a gate, both for Jesus and for us?

### ***John 14.1-7***

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'"

### **Focus**

Here Jesus proclaims himself to be our way to his destination, to his Father's house.

- What does it mean for him to be a way (the context shows Jesus means a path or a route here)?
- How does Jesus changed our perceptions of him and of the Father by claiming

that the path to God is a person rather than, for example, a way of life?

- Insofar as we are called to imitate Christ, what does it mean for us to become paths?

## *Session 5*

### **Jesus as Life (Jn 6.25-40 and 11.17-27)**

From Gates and Ways, we move to concepts that are central throughout the Bible, life (both eternal and ordinary), the bread that can sustain both sorts of life, and in the next session, light. In the prologue, John indissolubly connects both light and life with the Word: "What had come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people." In the body of the gospel, Jesus' own words about the bread of life, the resurrection and life, and the light reveal the foundations for John's certainty about this.

#### ***John 6.25-40***

"When [the crowd] found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?' Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.' Then they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.' So they said to him, 'What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat." ' Then Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives

you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.'

Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.'"

***John 11.17-27***

"When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'"

## **Focus**

On one level, the bread of John 6 is the eucharist, on another, it is the manna, the bread that came down from heaven. Just as God the Father sent the manna to sustain the life of those wandering the wilderness of the Exodus, so God the Word provides bread -- himself given for the world -- to sustain the lives of all who turn to him. In the story of Lazarus, the link between Jesus and life is far more direct, for in this sign he brings his dead friend back to life. Here Jesus identifies himself not with the "staff of life" but with life itself. But if Jesus was bread, was resurrection and life, we must in some measure also become these things, So...

- What does it mean for Jesus to embody bread?
- To embody resurrection and life?
- What would it mean for us, as individuals or as a church, to become bread, or life, or in some way to embody resurrection?

## *Session 6*

### **Jesus as Light for the World (Jn 8.12, 9.1-12)**

Now we finish the "I AM"s with Jesus' words about light, one of the most important recurring symbols in the prologue and the rest of the gospel.

#### ***John 8.12***

"Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'"

#### ***John 9.1-12***

"As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said

to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'"

### **Focus**

- What does it mean to be light?
- How do Jesus' words about himself here, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." compare with what the prologue says about him, "What had come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people."
- Notice that the name of the pool means "sent" -- how can we apply that both to the beggar and to Jesus?
- Insofar as we are called to imitate Jesus in the world, we must also strive to be light for the world -- what does that mean in our lives as individuals and as a church?

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