

Holy Week Homily Series
The "I Am's" of Jesus in the Gospel of John
John 1:1-4, 14, 4:25-26, 6:35, 7:29, 8:12, 8:23, 8:57-58, 10:7-9,
10:11-14, 10:35-36, 10:38, 11:23-25, 13:12-13, 14:5-6, 15: 1,5
March 17 to March 20, 2008, 12:15 pm

I. March 17, 2008

Introduction: For the next four days, as we partake of the Eucharist at our 12:15 services, I would like to offer a series of homilies about what are sometimes referred to as the "I Am's" of Jesus in the Gospel of John. And today's Gospel reading from the first chapter of John sets the stage for hearing about these majestic proclamations.

These statements are the ways in which Jesus described himself as he spoke to the crowds that followed him, or as he taught his disciples. They contain the words "I am," and are his own unqualified and unequivocal declarations about himself and who he is.

And they all show that Jesus was completely aware of his divine mission and his holy nature. These are not statements that could be made by a mere mortal. They are constant reminders of the point made so long ago by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* that Jesus requires us to believe that he was either God, or a fool.

As we hear these things that Jesus said about himself, it will be clear that he does not give us any middle ground. We cannot listen to these statements and then say that Jesus was merely a great teacher. And we cannot hear them and say that he was just a good man who lived two thousand years ago. If Jesus was only human he could not have gotten away with saying them. They simply would not have withstood scrutiny. And he certainly could not have gained a following that has grown into the worldwide Christian Church with over a billion adherents today.

So, forget this business about Jesus being just a great teacher or good man. It's not an option. Jesus either was the Son of God, or else he had a few screws loose.

The I Am's: In the time left today, I want to mention these statements in which Jesus said "I am," and then claimed to be something beyond our own human condition. We will get into them in more detail on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. They are in two categories.

First, there are seven explicit expressions where Jesus used metaphors to describe his everlasting role in the lives of all people. Second, there are seven more statements that Jesus made to describe his heavenly origins. In the first category, they are:

- I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (6:35).
- I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life (8:12).
- I am the gate for the sheep. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture (10:7-9).
- I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I know my own and my own know me (10:11-14).
- I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live (11:23-25).

- I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (14:5-6).
- 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 (15: 1,5).

These statements all are in John's Gospel. In the second category there are seven other statements where Jesus spoke of his messianic purpose and his relationship with God.

- The woman at the well said "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you" (4:25-26)
- As he was teaching in the temple he spoke about God and said, "I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me" (7:29).
- Then Jesus said to the Pharisees, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world" (8:23).
- Speaking to those who doubted him and proclaimed their own descent from Abraham, he said, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am" (8:57-58).
- To Jews who wanted to stone him he proclaimed, "Can you say that I am blaspheming because I said, I am God's Son?" (10:35-36).
- Then, to the same people he said that the Father sanctified him and sent him into the world, and they should understand because "The Father is in me and I am in the Father" (10:38).
- Finally, As he spoke to his disciples after washing their feet, he said, "You call me teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am" (13:12-13)

During our services the next three days we will discuss these words of Jesus and what they mean to us and to the world. I believe at the end of that time we will be able to understand the choice we have in thinking about who Jesus really is. And I am convinced that the only answer is that he truly is the son of God. To be continued . . .

II. March 18, 2008

Introduction: Today we continue with our series on the statements of Jesus in John's Gospel where he used the words "I am" to describe himself. Our combined Gospel reading set forth five of them. We heard Jesus say that he is the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate for the sheep, the good shepherd, and the resurrection and the life. Let's look at them.

The First Five Statements: Jesus said he was the bread of life (6:35). This described why he came to live among us. Just as through earthly bread we receive bodily nourishment and a healthy life in this world, Jesus said that through him we may find spiritual nourishment and eternal life in the next world.

Jesus called us, as God's people, to reach out and take the bread he offers. And he similarly calls the church, as Christ's body, to reach out and do the same.

If we, as individuals, do not partake of the bread Jesus offers, we lead sick and undernourished lives and have no hope for eternity. And if the Church, as a community, also does not partake of that bread, we have a sick and undernourished Christianity.

This is what Jesus meant when he said "I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." He was proclaiming that his mission was from God for the purpose of giving himself to us.

Jesus also said that he is the light (8:12). What is the purpose of a light? Normally we don't have lights just so we can sit and look at them, but rather we think of lights as ways to illuminate the things around us. We have lights so that we can see other things more clearly. Light is essential to life.

Jesus was the light in two ways. He was both divine light and worldly light. As the divine light he revealed God more clearly. In this way he showed us who God is, how God thinks, how God feels, and how God loves us. Jesus could do this because he was divine himself.

But as the worldly light he shined in the other direction. He represented us to God. Through his life here God could experience how we think, how we feel; and how we long for love. Jesus could do this because he was human and knew us intimately.

Next, Jesus said he was the gate for the sheep (10:7-9). How do we understand this? He meant that he is the door through which we all must go to have fellowship with God. Doors usually are the those things through which we must pass to get from one room to another.

Here Jesus was describing the door from this world to the next; the door from the here and now to the hereafter. He was making clear that he is the way, and the only way from mortal life to eternal life; from worldly life to spiritual life.

And this is a door through which we must go by faith. It is our choice to open the door and walk through. But the door won't open if we are not sincere in making that choice. Jesus is not an insurance policy that is comforting to have around, just in case.

To go through that door means to actually enter into him. It means to accept that he died on the cross for our sins, and to live our lives as best we can in a holy and Christian way.

This leads to the next statement. Jesus said he was the good shepherd (10:11-14). We just heard that he was the gate for the sheep, and now he is their shepherd. And he didn't say "a" good shepherd, but rather "the" good shepherd; the one and only. This means that his sheep always have been and always will be his first priority. It's a wonderful thing to realize that we are his sheep.

He died to save his sheep, and then he rose from the dead to serve his sheep. Isn't that the greatest story ever told? He knows us. He lives in our hearts and hears our prayers. And that can be immensely comforting if we allow him to direct our lives. He is the good shepherd, and if we are in his flock we never will be lost.

Finally, for today at least, Jesus said he was the resurrection and the life (11:23-25). This leads us right into the joy of Easter day. It is what we will celebrate beginning with our Easter Vigil on Saturday night and then continuing on through Sunday. In the reality of his resurrection is the sure and certain hope of our own resurrection. And in the life to which Jesus was raised is our promise of living eternally in God's presence.

And note that Jesus put resurrection before life. "I am the resurrection and the life." Spiritually we are dead in our sins without him. Through his resurrection our life in eternity is assured.

Think about these five things that Jesus said. These are not the words of someone who was just a great teacher or a good man, are they? They either are the words of the Son of God or else they are the ravings of someone whose barrel was a couple pickles short. There is no middle way. We will continue with this theme tomorrow

III. March 19, 2008

Introduction: We're now half way done. And today we begin part three of our examination of some of the things Jesus said in John's Gospel about who he really is.

On Monday we raised the question of whether the scope of some of Jesus' statements is so broad that we cannot consider him to have been merely an important historical figure in the eyes of people who do not believe he is the Son of God.

Yesterday we talked about five of the seven great "I am" statements in the Gospel of John. Jesus said I am the bread of life, I am the light, I am the gate for the sheep, I am the good shepherd, and I am the resurrection and the life.

Today we heard the last two of those statements in the reading. Jesus said he is the way, and the truth, and the light (14:5-6). Then, in the garden the night before his death, he said he was the vine and we are the branches that abide in him (15:1,5).

But that's not all. In addition to the seven great "I am" statements, there also are seven other occasions where Jesus said prophetic things in which the words "I am" figure prominently. We heard three today, and will consider the last four tomorrow.

In the first three of these statements the woman at the well said "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you" (4:25-26). As he was teaching in the temple he spoke about God and said, "I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me" (7:29). Then Jesus said to the Pharisees, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world" (8:23).

Examining Jesus Statements: Let's review these things Jesus said. I am the way, and the truth, and the light. That covers a lot of ground doesn't it?

Jesus meant that he is the way through which humanity has salvation. We cannot achieve fellowship with God through any other means that exclude him. We can say that we attend church, and we can say that we are good people who help the community, and we believe those are good things. But if we do not actually believe in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice, then we are missing the point of who Jesus is.

And this applies not only to the next life, but to this life as well. Even before we get to eternity, Jesus is the way to happiness, and peace, and to fulfillment as we live our lives right now.

As the truth, Jesus embodies both the incarnate word and the inspired word. He is the fulfillment of the Old Testament law, he is the great teacher of how we are to live and love one another until God's kingdom arrives, and he is the revelation of God himself. When we think about religion, we don't have the opportunity to start with a clean sheet of paper and design something that is comfortable for us. We start with what actually is. And Jesus is that truth.

He also said he is the life, as the last part of this "I am" statement. Certainly we have physical life, and many people go through their physical lives with nothing more. They never know Jesus. For us, however, he offers spiritual life, a life in God made known through the Holy Spirit. In this way we are sustained in our eternal hopes, and live today in victory over sin and ourselves.

Then Jesus said that he was the vine and we are the branches. Perhaps we should review some terminology. In winegrowers' or vintners' terms, the vines are not those long things that grow along the trellis; those are the branches. The vine is the basic trunk of the plant that grows

out of the ground, then the branches grow out from the vine, and the grapes grow from the branches.

So in the reading we see that Jesus is the vine. He is the root, the source of life and sustenance to the branches, and we are the branches who depend upon the vine for our own lives and all that we have or ever could hope to be. As the vine he is necessary to our ability as branches to bear fruit, to live Christian lives.

Now we move into some of the other statements that Jesus used to describe himself in conversation with others. He told the woman at the well who had come to fill her water jar that he was the long-expected messiah prophesied by the ancient prophets. What must people have thought when they heard such words?

What if we were at the gas station filling up our car and someone standing nearby said that he was the messiah? We probably would think the fellow was delusional. We certainly wouldn't think he was a great teacher or a good man. And history would not record him as such if what he said was not true.

After that, Jesus told people in the temple that he knew God because he was from God. And he wasn't speaking generally as we might when we say things like "God is with us." This was a lot different. It was a direct and unequivocal proclamation that he actually knows God personally, and was sent by God to earth.

And finally, Jesus dramatically distanced himself from the Pharisees. He told them they were from below, he was from above. They were of this world. He was not of this world. The Pharisees probably thought, "You got that right, you are from another planet."

And this last example really frames the question. Who did Jesus think we was, anyway? Most people probably thought he was like them. He didn't look any different. Well, Jesus' words tell us who he thought he was, and those words don't let us get by with thinking that he was just a great teacher or a good man. He said who he was in many different ways, and they all point to the truth that he is the Son of God. We will conclude this story tomorrow. Stay tuned.

IV. March 20, 2008

Introduction: Today we conclude our four part series on who Jesus Christ really is, as evidenced by some of the things he said about himself in the Gospel of John. We began by putting forth the idea that as we look at Jesus today, we cannot reject the fantastic claims that he made, and still give him any credibility. We either must accept him completely as God, or else reject him completely as an irrational human being.

Then we followed up by considering some of the things he said that revealed this self-understanding. Today we finish up with four more of his declarations that are in today's Gospel reading, and I will offer some thoughts on what this all means.

The Last of Jesus' Statements: The setting in the first part of today's Gospel was a conversation between Jesus and some disbelieving Jews. Jesus spoke of having been in the presence of God the Father, but they said that Abraham was their Father. They cynically asked if Jesus thought he was greater than Abraham, and Jesus said "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am."

What a claim! Jesus said that he always has existed; that he was with God in heaven before Abraham was even born. In fact, he even used one of the Old Testament names for God, "I Am," as he explained his eternal nature.

The next example occurred when Jesus was in the portico of the temple talking to some other Jews who questioned him. He said that he had been sanctified by God, and therefore could not be accused of blasphemy when he claimed to be God's son. Once again we hear how Jesus viewed himself and understood his destiny

After this, he said to the same people that God the Father was in him and he was in God the father. This must have either convinced them completely, or else offended them completely. He was speaking to religious Jews who certainly understood Hebrew Scriptures and the traditions of their faith. They certainly would not thought of him as a normal person, either way.

Finally, as we think about the foot washing service we will have later this evening, we go back to that night when Jesus washed the disciples' feet. When he finished he said to them "You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am." I repeat, "And you are right, for that is what I am."

There we have it. The night before he went to the cross Jesus plainly told his disciples he was the Lord. And either he was, or he was not. What do Christians think about that? What do people think who are not Christians?

Conclusion: After hearing what we have heard the last four days, I would suggest that as much as people might search for it, there is no neutral position. There is no middle way. There is no fence upon which we can sit. Jesus is either God or was a fraud. He cannot be merely a great teacher or a good man.

So, we have three choices. We can believe that Jesus thought he was the Son of God but was mistaken, or we can believe that he knew he was not the Son of God but claimed to be in order to mislead people, or we can believe that Jesus truly is who he says he is.

Let's look at these choices. What if Jesus was mistaken? What if he actually thought that he was God but in reality he was not. This would require us believe that he was a megalomaniac or a madman. History has had its share of people who believed they were gods, and no one ever thought they were great teachers or good men.

Or what if Jesus was a deceiver? What if he knew that he was not God, yet intentionally misled people in order to gain a following. Well, if this is true, if Jesus did mislead us, then we as Christians probably are the most gullible and pathetic bunch of people who ever have lived on the face of the earth. That hardly is the legacy of a great teacher or good man.

So much for the idea that Jesus was not the Son of God but still should be viewed with respect or admiration. There is nothing to respect or admire about an ordinary person who would make such outlandish claims, if they were not true.

And during these four days we only have been considering some things Jesus said about himself in John's Gospel. What about some of his statements elsewhere in the Bible? In Mathew and Luke he told a paralyzed man he didn't know and had never met that his sins were forgiven (Mt. 9:5, Lk. 5:20). And again he told the sinful woman that her sins were forgiven. The people around even asked, "Who is this who even forgives sins (Lk. 7:49)?"

If Jesus was just an ordinary person how could he tell other people that their sins are forgiven? And note that Jesus was not forgiving the man for something he did to Jesus, but rather for his sins generally. Can you tell your neighbor that his or her sins are forgiven based on your own authority? Of course not. So why did Jesus do that? He either was abusing his authority or he actually had it.

And what about when Jesus told the blind man that his faith had saved him (Lk. 18:42)? Or when he told the bleeding woman that her faith has healed her (Mt. 9:22, Mk 5:34)? Or when he told the leper that his faith had made him well (Lk. 17:19)?

The bottom line is that Jesus said too much to be disregarded, and the consequences of those statements being false are fatal to any positive understanding of him as a mere human. He either is the Son of God and deserves our praise and worship, or he was a snake-oil salesman and deserves our scorn.

We cannot treat Jesus as having been only a great man in the face of these things he said about himself. In fact, he cannot even have been a great man if the things he said were false. But we cannot deny him as God if we believe the things he said are true. It is a choice. I choose to believe. *Amen.*