

Easter 4 2015 St Marylebone 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Unique to the Fourth Gospel is the sequence of bold self-defining statements made by Jesus which begin "I am".

'I am the Bread of Life'; 'I am the Light of the World'; 'I am the Door of the Sheep'; 'I am the Resurrection and the Life'; 'I am the True Vine'; 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life' and the one we hear today, 'I am the Good Shepherd'.

Each of these seven bold assertions introduces a parable and each relates directly to one of the seven 'signs' by which Jesus is revealed to the world.

A saying, a parable, and a sign for each of the seven days of creation, spoken by the Word, the One through whom creation has come to be, and through whom the new creation will come to be through the cross.

To those who heard Jesus' sayings, there could have been no mistake about his intention in beginning each of the seven 'I ams' with the words *ego eimi* - the very words used by the translators of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, to translate God's self-revelatory words to Moses as he approached the Burning Bush on Sinai: "I am".

So, every time Jesus uses the phrase, *ego eimi*, he draws attention to himself as the one in whom the God revealed to Moses, to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob is continuing this self-revelation.

'I am the long-promised One', says Jesus, I am the One for whom you have been waiting and longing.

I am the One to whom you must look now, the One to whom you must listen now.

I am the One in whom and through whom you can meet and know the living God.

I am the One in whom and through whom you will find true life, the One in whom you will live and bear fruit.

After multiplying the loaves, Jesus declares, that he is the Bread of Life. The manna which Moses gave the grumbling people in the desert was but a foretaste, temporary hunger satisfying expedient, of the One who was promised.

In Jesus, God gives himself as the true and living bread, the bread of heaven, the bread which brings life to the world, the bread which alone can satisfy the world's spiritual hunger.

I am, the light of the world, Jesus declares at the Feast of Tabernacles; the light which is not only the dynamic force of creation and therefore of all life, but the light which brings true discernment and perfect judgement and which alone offers a way out of darkness and death and soul-destroying despair.

I am the resurrection and the life, Jesus not only proclaims to those who gather around the tomb of his dead friend Lazarus, but enacts in front of their eyes as Lazarus is raised from the dead.

At the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples that he alone is the way to the Father, that no-one can come to the Father but through him, the great I am, who is

the Way, the Truth and the Life; that he is the one who uniquely offers God's authentic life to those who come to believe, and through whom the those who believe are brought into the very life and love of God.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says, I am, the Good Shepherd: not some hired hand, brought in to look after someone else's sheep, but the owner-shepherd himself, who is prepared to search for the lost and even to lay down his life for the flock.

The sheep are his; they belong to this shepherd, and the shepherd knows each and every one of them, as they know him.

Jesus has invested time and care in his sheep. Jesus is the shepherd who pastures the flock, the shepherd who waters them and tends to their every need. Jesus is the careful guardian who protects them from harm and danger.

So why will people not listen to his voice?

Why will the Scribes and the Pharisees not heed his words?

Why will the people not accept the life that he offers in all its abundance?

As Rudolf Schnackenburg point out, all the 'I am' sayings of Jesus are variations on a single theme: I am come that you might have life, and have it in abundance.

The great I am, is amongst his own people; he offers them life, but they will not listen, choosing instead to wander off into the darkness; choosing death rather than life; following their own misguided ways rather than walk in the paths Jesus has laid down for them.

Jesus is not only the Good Shepherd who will die for his sheep; he is the door of the sheepfold, and those who choose to enter through him will be safe and know the abundant life that is his gift, the new life that is guaranteed by his own death and resurrection. Jesus is the giver, the gift and the gift's guarantor.

By identifying himself with the God who revealed himself to Moses, who called Abraham to follow him and entered into Covenant-relationship with him, Jesus set himself on a collision course with the religious authorities of his day.

That Jesus is God, one with the Father and the Spirit, is the scandal at the heart of our faith: the scandal with which the early Church wrestled, and which has put insurmountable distance between Christianity and the other great Abrahamic faiths.

But Jesus is God's gift and invitation to mankind, indeed to the whole of creation, to enter into new relationship: a relationship with the great 'I am', the dynamic life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the dynamic love which calls creation into being, and which raises Jesus from the dead, the first fruits of a new creation.

Amen. Alleluia!