



Lent 5 2019 St Marylebone 8.30 am & 11 am

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

“. . . the tongue is a little member”, writes St James, “and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! . . . the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: . . . it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.”

Words are some of the most powerful tools that we have at our disposal.

At one moment they can be harsh weapons dealing cruel blows, the next agents of healing.

Words can make an army fight, or they can call for peace and lead into silence.

Words can be an intimate exchange between lovers or a grand public statement for the ears of the world to hear.

Words can change the world forever, or be lost on the breeze never to be remembered.

Perhaps the greatest wordsmiths are those who use words sparingly, economically.

The best poets, can, with just a few well-chosen words, weave a picture that entraps the mind and enchants the heart.

In just five words, Jesus preaches a sermon, seals his fate and brings all history together, taking his hearers - and us - beyond the now, beyond history and time, into the divine ever-present continuous moment of God's love.

“Before Abraham was, I am.” “prin abraam genesthai ego eimi”^{xi}

To us, perhaps, Jesus words might be something of a riddle, but to those who first heard them, there was nothing quizzical, no riddle, no conundrum; everyone who would have heard those words would have understood with a blinding clarity what he said.

No wonder that his hearers scrabble around among the builders rubble in the Temple court in order to stone him for blatant, unapologetic blasphemy.

“Before Abraham was, I am.” “prin abraam genesthai ego eimi”

As the crowd responds with such anger, Jesus knew that he would die.

St John, most especially among the evangelists, shapes the whole of his gospel in a way that everything moves inexorably towards the cross on Calvary.

The cross is the reason why God has chosen to himself and take the form of servant and die; ultimate ignominy, but also

the apotheosis of divine glory.

Along the way from that tense moment in the Temple precinct when Jesus' hearers pick up stones to throw at him, through the temporary respite of a shared meal with friends and a bed for the night in nearby Bethany, Jesus' journey to Golgotha is a road of unfolding epiphany, of unequivocal recognition; the truth and the fact of his words "*Before Abraham was, I am.*" "*prin abraam genesthai ego eimi*" are unpacked, deciphered, and shape the whole of creation's history.

Martha and Mary, Lazarus, Peter, Simon of Cyrene, the centurion, the women at the cross and the tomb, the repentant thief, John the Beloved Disciple, Joseph of Arimathea even Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate, Barabbas and Judas Iscariot - all see Jesus for who he is.

Hopefully our journeying with Jesus through Lent – our journeying with Jesus through life - is also one of ever-deepening recognition; a journey of ever-growing commitment as we come to know Jesus clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more and more nearly, day after day of our earthly pilgrimage.

So what was it that Jesus said in those five very carefully chosen words that caused such offence to some and yet, for others, proved to be a moment of universe-changing clarity and recognition?

At the meeting on Mount Sinai between God and Man, Moses asks, "*Whom shall I say sent me? Tell me your name*",

to which he receives the reply “I am who I am. Tell them “I am” has sent you to them”.

“ego eimi/ I am”ⁱⁱⁱ is the name by which God chooses to reveal to Moses, and it is the same name by which Jesus chooses to reveal himself to the crowds in Jerusalem.

“ego eimi/ I am” - in just two words Jesus reveals his divinity and proclaims himself to be the source of all life and being, the centre of all that is, the Christ who is “the same yesterday and today and for ever”.

As we now enter Passiontide and the road to Calvary becomes, painfully, ever clearer, may we seek to know Jesus our Redeemer, friend and brother, more clearly, may we come to love Jesus more dearly and, whatever the cost, may we commit or recommit ourselves to follow Jesus ever more nearly.^{iv}

Amen.

ⁱ James 3.5-12

ⁱⁱ John 8.58-59

ⁱⁱⁱ אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, *'ehyeh 'ăšer 'ehyeh* Exodus 3.13-15

^{iv} Prayer of St Richard of Chichester

Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits thou hast given me,
for all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly,
and follow thee more nearly, day by day. Amen.