



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Lent 5 Passion Sunday 2020 St Marylebone

John 8:46-59

*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.”ⁱ

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 and the finest 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 perfect love.

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

To us perhaps, Jesus words have something of the riddle about them, but to those who first heard them, there was no riddle, no conundrum, they understood exactly what he was saying.

Incensed by what Jesus had said, his hearers scabble around among the builders' rubble in the Temple Court in order to stone him for his unambiguous blasphemy.

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

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

St John, most especially among the evangelists, shapes the whole of his gospel narrative towards the cross on Calvary.

This is the reason why God had chosen to become human; ultimate ignominy, yes, but the apotheosis of divine glory, too!

Along the way from that tense moment in the Temple precinct when Jesus' hearers pick up stones to throw at him, via the temporary respite of a meal and a bed at a friend's house in nearby Bethany, Jesus' journey to Golgotha is a road of dawning perception for those who had ears to hear and eyes to see: *"Before Abraham was, I am."* *"prin abraam genesthai ego eimi"*.

Martha and Mary, Lazarus, Peter, Simon of Cyrene, the centurion, the women who would gather at the foot of the cross, the repentant thief - all see Jesus for who he is.

Our journey with Jesus also needs to be one of increasing perception, of dawning recognition; a journey of ever-deepening commitment as we come to know him more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly, day after day of our earthly pilgrimageⁱⁱⁱ.

So, what was it that Jesus said in those five extremely 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 between God and Moses at the Burning Bush on Mount Sinai, Moses asks, *“Whom shall I say sent me? Tell me your name”, to which God replies “I am who I am. Tell them “I am” has sent you to them”*.^{iv}

“I am/ego eimi” is the name by which God chose to reveal Godself to Moses, and it is the name by which Jesus chose to reveal himself to the world.

“I am/ego eimi” - 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”*.^v

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 follow Jesus ever more nearly. Amen.

ⁱ James 3.5-6

ⁱⁱ John 8.58

ⁱⁱⁱ 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.

^{iv} Exodus 3.13-14

^v Hebrews 13.8 qv. Revelation 22.13