

Reflections for Holy Week 2021
Cumnor URC and St. Columba's URC, Oxford

In preparation for Easter, members of our two churches have been reflecting on the seven 'I am' sayings from John's Gospel. We invite you to read, reflect and pray with us as we journey to Easter.

These reflections will be shared by email and on social media, with our thanks to our authors.

Monday 29 March

John 8:12-19: I am the light of the world

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.' Then the Pharisees said to him, 'You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.' Jesus answered, 'Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgement is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.' Then they said to him, 'Where is your Father?' Jesus answered, 'You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.'

Reflection

Light was almost the first thing God created; God saw that it was good, and it was separated from the darkness. Similarly, Jesus is the ultimate Good – holy and set apart – and He must come first. Light is both the source and sustaining factor of life. It enables us to grow food, to work, to travel, to interact, and to feel safe. In the same way, Jesus provides everything we need. Without him our souls could not flourish or even exist.

As Jesus Himself says, no one puts a light source under a basket – it is to be shared, 'so that those who come in can see [it]'. We should share the light of Jesus with whoever comes into our lives. In the Old

Testament, the people of Israel followed God, manifested in a pillar of fire, to their freedom, and in the same way we can follow Jesus' light to ours. And if we doubt, Jesus explains in the rest of the passage why His word is trustworthy, in case its life saving power as demonstrated in the previous passage wasn't enough!

Finally, like so many of God's good gifts, light is something which we often take for granted. From my seat on the sofa I can see at least ten different light sources, from candles to screens to cat toys. When the sun goes down, I just flick a switch and carry on with whatever I was doing. Our world might be filled with small, artificial lights, but Jesus claims to be the light of the world – not just of one room or one city, but the whole of creation. As ships used to follow the stars, we can rely on Him to guide us, and as the sunlight keeps us warm we can rest in His love.

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, that you are the light of the world. Help us to follow where you lead, share your love where there is spiritual darkness, take in your nourishment, grow in your strength, and never take your life-giving majesty for granted. Amen

Katherine Haigh

Tuesday 30 March

John 10:11-18: I am the good shepherd

'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.'

Reflection

I have long felt this Gospel story to be a message about taking responsibility. The amount of responsibility we assume changes with age and circumstances and is different for every one of us. Our Lord always cares and responds appropriately.

As a child, growing up on a farm with cattle livestock, I learnt about responsibility for livestock quite young. One of my earliest memories of spending time with my Dad, was the winter I was finally tall enough to sit on a cushion and steer the landrover across the fields, whilst he spread hay or feed off the back of the vehicle.

I grew up in a church going family. Dad took me and my siblings to Church every Sunday. He was my first earthly Good Shepherd – always encouraging me in every new experience or adventure.

I have travelled across many 'fields' in the intervening years and met and learned from many more Good Shepherds. Somewhere along that journey it became my turn to sometimes act as Good Shepherd to others.

In the last year the plight of younger generations, many of whom have struggled with C19 restrictions, has been brought sharply to my attention, particularly through my youngest staff.

I have found myself teaching, leading, nurturing young minds – encouraging them to develop new skills, including taking on new responsibilities which has made a significant difference to their feelings of self worth.

We are lambing on the farm at the moment, so the staff have been watching YouTube videos to refresh/train on lambing techniques. Younger staff in particular have been encouraged to put training into practice. Lessons on injections, fitting a prolapse harness, early signs of lambing, the stages of lambing, malpresentations, tail ringing and castration have all been tackled with mostly successful outcomes.

Witnessing the 'birth' of hope in a young person, partially through the successful birthing of a live lamb but also through assuming new responsibilities, reminds us that St John's Gospel and the Good Shepherd are as relevant today as 2000 years ago.

Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you for sending us your Good Shepherd to teach, love and care for us.

Help us to follow in his footsteps, supporting particularly those young people whose pastures have not been green and whose waters have been so hugely disturbed during this last year of pandemic.

Help us to teach, love and care for them, and thereby nurture them, and their families, back to health and happiness.

In your dear name's sake, Amen.

Anne Gow

Wednesday 31 March

John 15:1-10: I am the vine

'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.

Reflection

At first glance this passage looked like "my way or the high way". This evacuation plan for the next world made me sad. But then, I let my own experience of God colour my reading.

Text without context is dangerous, so I went back to the whole passage and the language spoken then.

Jesus comes to change our mind about God, Plunge us into intimacy.

This last I AM (INANA) the i within the I, i am within the I AM, is about total connection, not correction. Interconnectivity with all that is, has been and to come. The beloved community. God in me and I in God and all.

Spirit is same word as breath and we breathe God in with our first breath, original blessing, to go back to the BREATH. We breathe the breath of the BREATHER. Whether we are aware or not. We are only separate if we believe we are.

THE VINE, root is “open” ” *that which flows out.*”

THE BRANCHES, “*that which receives the flow*” (and flows back), are distinct, race, religion (or not) culture, colour , gender but so beloved. The twigs of my branch are Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindus, Bahai’s , druids, loads of “nones”. We all speak the same language, let our life speak in the same fashion.

The SOURCE is the gardener and cares for ALL of us, those who are aware and those who are not or struggle.

The latter, he will gather to himself and nurture, if they will let him/her. Those who are too battered by life, too wounded, he will gather, “put to the fire” and return them to himself.

Every bad deed stems from suffering, so what if they are so far gone they don’t want to be joined back? Then I suppose God will feel the absence of that limb like an amputee and grieve

How do we look at fire? Scary and destructive or something that purifies, tempers, makes glass and melts gold into potential jewellery? Being on fire?

Burning the poorly branches makes ash that goes back to fertilise?

Would you rather be a burning bush or a shrub?

Jesus wants the disciples to “Stand on your own two feet, get on “the Way” and fulfil your purpose. Love as I did, with all you are and all you have.” When he goes, he will connect to them in a deeper way. As the Christ, by any other name, the forcefield of God.

Abide: *"Let yourself be overpowered by something greater."*

If our GPS is to God and we are "singlehearted" our prayer will be answered before we even ask, because God will have put the desire there, in the first place.

Heaven and hell are a state of consciousness and as Simone Weill says "it is heaven all the way to heaven and "hell" all the way to hell. In the now. The beyondness is only the deepest NOW.

Prayer

My beloved, give me the desire to desire what you desire me to desire.

Amen

Graziella Burnie

Maundy Thursday, 1 April

John 6:35-40: I am the bread of life

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.'

Reflection

Jesus fed 5000 people from a boy's lunchbox.

Place – Galilee, an insurrection hotspot.

Time – Passover, commemoration of their liberation from Egypt.

Sign – Bread from Heaven, like Moses the liberator.

Where are we going with this? Obviously we are going to march on Jerusalem and throw the Romans out. Have I got your attention? Right, now that's not at all what I meant.

What is bread to us? To me it's one item on the supermarket list. If I ran out I would use Ryvitas. Marie Antoinette would have used brioche. For the French peasants and for the people listening to Jesus they would starve. In our society today 'religion' can be something like bread – "I'm Tesco and you are Hovis, that's OK". Jesus isn't saying that, he's saying he is the bread without which we will starve.

That's the easy part. The hard part is how do we change our thinking. I have a decision to make. I've made many before, it isn't difficult. Not worth praying about it. Am I right to be that confident? I'm not saying have an extended formal prayer session, but perhaps a sentence. If Jesus needed to pray before taking action surely I do even more. A friend needs support, but someone else will check on them. Quite likely they will, but not certainly. If I take a moment to feed on the life of Jesus I will remember that he made caring for people a very high priority. I can spend the time listening to my friend's woes yet again strengthened by the knowledge of Jesus spending time with people (and the memory of friends listening to my woes).

Jesus isn't just bread; he is the bread of life. Feeding on his life will give us life.

Prayer

Lord, we pray for a sense of reality. Without feeding on you in our spirit we will starve. Please open our eyes to the danger. Please give us not just daily bread but spiritual sustenance every moment of the day.

In our busy lives, often unnecessarily busy, we ask for grace to make the time to include the spiritual nourishment we need. Not as an option, but as necessary as physical food.

Thank you for giving us this food.

Amen

Mary Thewlis

Good Friday, 2 April

John 10:7-10: I am the door

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.

Reflection

I am the door of the sheep – like any door once opened anyone can come, like our front door of the housing association which is unlocked at the moment. But Jesus is the Good Shepherd and the sheep knows the sound of his voice and follow it. So they come in too. They find pasture lots of food and are promised an abundant life.

We all know people who have had more than their share of grief. But if we follow in his paths we should know his goodness. When I think of abundant life I think of all the friends I have – that's what makes life abundant for me. I also thank God for a roof over my head.

Prayer

Help us to find the door into your kingdom and find the abundant life you have to offer. May we share what we have with others so they too can find the door.

Tessa Davidson

Easter Saturday, 3 April

John 14:1-6: I am the way, the truth and the life

'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.'

Reflection

Those who do not believe may concede that Jesus was an ethical genius. So it is important that we Christians who do believe pay close attention to his teaching.

In John 14 verse 6 Jesus says to Thomas "I am the way and the truth and the life." This statement was made in the context of Jesus explaining to the disciples how they could draw nearer to God.

What is the way of Jesus ? In Holy Week it is important to point out that following the way of Jesus involves sacrifice. Jesus made sacrifices both when he upset the religious authorities of his day and when he made the supreme sacrifice on the cross. Our politicians have at times praised the public for the sacrifices they have made during the lockdowns. Our society not only faces a pandemic but also a climate crisis. To tackle global warming we may have to make greater sacrifices than are involved in simply being unable to eat out.

It can be argued that when Jesus preached he told the truth. Mark 8 verses 34-38 describes how Jesus told the crowd "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Considering life we remember that John 10 verse 10 narrates how Jesus said " I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly " In other words the gift of life is probably the greatest gift we have and Jesus brings it abundantly.

Prayer

Loving God

In Holy Week we give thanks for the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

We give thanks that we are free to study and learn from this teaching.

May we learn from the resurrection of Jesus that death is not the end.

We ask that despite our failings we can become true disciples of the risen Lord.

Amen

Ian Kennedy

Easter Day, 4 April

John 10:17-27: I am the resurrection and the life

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.'

Again the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, 'He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' Others were saying, 'These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.

Reflection

Martha was waiting for the resurrection. She believed on the last day, when the dead were raised, she would see Lazarus again. She had waited for Jesus to come and heal her brother so he would not die.

Yet he *did* die.

Four days had passed.

Four days of mourning,

Of loss,

Of hopelessness.

Death had taken her brother and left her nothing but sadness.

Mary had also waited for Jesus to come. She hoped for healing and held to the belief that his arrival would stop what they feared most; death.

Here he stood; *now*, but too late.

He could have come earlier.

He could have healed Lazarus.

Now, she and her sister would have to keep waiting for the last day, for the resurrection.

Resurrection is not the continuation of hope. It's the end of hope. We can hope for healing, for good weather, or to win the lottery. But none of those things matter in death. Death brings an end to everything; it brings an end to us.

The seed must cease to exist before the stem can emerge from the ground. If the seed remains, the plant will never be. Indeed, when the caterpillar enters the cocoon, it goes to die. The small creature decomposes completely; its very essence disappears. The butterfly can never exist until the caterpillar is dead and gone.

There can be no resurrection and life without death and loss.

Jesus tenderly, tearfully brought Mary and Martha to the end of everything they held onto. He let Lazarus die. He allowed the sisters to grieve and mourn and weep for days and it was then, *only then* in the midst of their darkness and loss could they finally see the resurrection and the life they had been waiting for.

Prayer

Lord, how often do we hope for you to intervene on our terms? We hope for a miracle that we can believe in. We negotiate the terms of our own rescue.

We confess to you the sin of believing in only what we control. We believe in you Rabbi, Teacher, when you heal on our terms, when you come when we call.

But you dare to take us further. You long to show us a deeper part of yourself. So, you take our hands and tearfully lead us to the end of ourselves, to the end of hope so that we can truly see you, experience you and believe in you, Lord, our Resurrection and our Life.

Amen

Dan Thompson

New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.