

SUNDAY 16 AUGUST 2020

JESUS: IN HIS OWN WORDS

'I am'

*Lord I come to your awesome presence,
from the shadows into your radiance.
Search me, try me, consume all my darkness.*

As I come into God's presence, I choose to praise him in the words of Psalm 103:1-5.

¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.
² Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
³ who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
⁴ who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
⁵ who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

On one occasion, Jesus entered a long debate with some of his followers. These people had heard Jesus speak and, at some level, had believed in him (John 8:31ff). However, they had not thought through the implications of their belief. Jesus presents a picture of himself that is more radical than they are willing to fully accept. They believed in Jesus, but they were unwilling to take that final step which challenged their past assumptions, particularly their belief that they were special to God simply by virtue of having Abraham as their ancestor. Jesus' response to their self-assurance is as staggering as it is profound.

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:58)

This is not the first time Jesus has referred to himself simple as 'I am' (cf 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28. Also 13:19; 18:5, 7). On some of those other occasions speaking this way had raised eyebrows and hackles. Now the result is unequivocal. This is blasphemy (8:59). There can be no doubt that Jesus is making a significant claim about his relationship with God. First, the contrast between 'was' and 'am'. When Jesus says Abraham 'was' he means that Abraham existed in a past time-frame, that he was born, lived and died in the past. Abraham's time was finite and time bound. When Jesus says, "Before Abraham was, I am," therefore, he is pointing to his own pre-existence with God beyond the bounds of time.

Second, the use of the expression 'I am', without qualification, echoes the opening words of John's Gospel (1:1-3). Both John and this group of Jewish believers understand the implication of Jesus' use of this particular phrase: Jesus is identifying himself with the Old Testament divine name. God

reveals himself to Moses as 'I AM' (see Exodus 3:14) and comforts his people with the same name as they return from Exile (Isaiah 43:25; 51:12; 52:6).

In their debate with Jesus these would-be believers invoked the name of Abraham. Jesus responds by saying, in effect, "Your father Abraham longed to see this day; with the eyes of faith he saw it and was glad. All the hopes, dreams, longings and dim aspirations of humanity, reaching out blindly after something other, something deeper and better than they knew, find in me their fulfilment. It was of me that they were dreaming. It was toward me that they were climbing; even the greatest of them."

Such a claim demands a response.

Pause and pray

As Jesus reveals himself in these various sayings we are left with a vivid, though still incomplete, image of one who is unique in human history and experience. Acknowledging him simply as a good man or a great teacher will not do. These 'I am' sayings, together with the wider picture drawn by John and the other gospel writers, cause us to stop and think. Who is this man? Paul answers:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:15–20)

In all my thoughts, may I think of you.

In all my words, may I speak of you.

In all my actions, may I act as you.

In all my interactions, may I love like you.

*In everything, may I look like you,
more and more each day.*

Amen.