

The "I am" Statements

John 6:35 "Jesus said to (the crowd), 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'"



Today's Gospel is a part of a long and elaborate discourse which began with last week's Gospel and will be the focus of the Gospel readings for a total of five weeks in a row. Yet because the narrative is so long and so broken up with each week's readings, we sometimes lose track about what's going on here, or about what is really being said here.

The story began last week with the feeding of the 5,000 by the Sea of Galilee. In today's reading, Jesus chided the crowd for following him only because they ate their fill of bread on that hillside by the sea. Instead, Jesus encouraged them to seek the food that does not perish. Indeed, in today's reading, Jesus declares himself to be that bread of life, and whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. In next week's reading the crowd becomes skeptical about this claim. "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph," they say, "whose father and mother we know?" In two weeks' time, Jesus will declare that "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink

his blood, you have no life in you." In three weeks' time, "because of (what Jesus is saying) many of his (followers)," we are told, "declared that this teaching was 'difficult,' and turned back and no longer went about with him." It is in the end a long and complicated dialogue, including images associated with the Last Supper, like eating the Body of Christ and drinking his blood, and with the Resurrection, with Jesus declaring that he will raise up his followers on the last day. Only the Last Supper and the Resurrection haven't happened yet at this point in John's Gospel. --- And this isn't the only long and complicated dialogue recorded in the Gospel of John. There is another famous discourse with his disciples after the Last Supper that goes on and on for three chapters!

We don't have these extended theological dialogues in the other Gospels. And this isn't the way Jesus talks in the other Gospels. In the other Gospels, Jesus tells simple stories and parables. In the other Gospels, Jesus talks to common folk, in a common folk way, like with the woman at the well, or the tax collector, or simple fishermen by the lake.

But not so in John's Gospel. In John's Gospel, Jesus goes on and on in several long theological discourses, with ideas and images that we simply don't find in the other three Gospels. This contrast between the way Jesus seems to speak in John's Gospel and the way Jesus talks in the first three Gospels is perhaps best

exemplified by those famous "I am" statements, you know, the places where Jesus says "I am" and then adds some kind of predicate; like, "I am the bread of life" in today's reading, or "I am the light of the world," "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the vine," "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and "I am the good shepherd." These are some of the most beloved sayings of Jesus. Yet none of these statements can be found in the other three gospels. All the "I am" statements are found only in John's Gospel.

Now a conservative evangelical friend of mine in college, admitted to the stark difference in the way Jesus talked in John's Gospel from the other three, but he insisted that the "I am" statements and these long theological dialogues was how Jesus talked to his disciples, who are reported in the other Gospels not to have understood Jesus' parables, and how Jesus had to keep taking them aside and explaining things to them, that these statements are part of that, part of Jesus' explanation of who he was to his disciplines who didn't seem to understand his teachings. But this long dialogue, a part of which is in today's Gospel, belies that kind of thinking; belies that kind of reasoning. For Jesus is talking here, not to his disciples, but to the large crowd who followed him after the feeding of the five thousand. They are the ones hearing what he has to say, and

complaining, and lamenting, and eventually turning away from him because of his teachings are, in their words, "difficult."

Thus the "I am" statements and these long and complicated theological dialogues in John's Gospel suggest to many that they are more of a reflection of the writer of the Gospel than of Jesus himself. This isn't how Jesus talks in the other Gospels; it is more about how John, the supposed Gospel writer, talks about Jesus. John, it would appear, is trying to explain to his readers who Jesus is. And like the one in today's reading, it suggests to me that John is writing years after Jesus' death and resurrection, and introducing ideas and images from those later events to try make clear to his readers who Jesus was.

And so, he introduces into these long dialogues some of those beloved "I am" statements that make clear who the writer thinks Jesus is, each with a couple of lines of further explanation. Like, I am the bread of life; and if you eat this bread you will never be hungry. Or I am the vine; and my Father is the vinegrower, who prunes the branches that do not bear fruit. Or I am the good shepherd; and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Each use of the "I am" statements says something about who Jesus is, and about how we relate to him, and to the Father. I understand and appreciate the Gospel writer's dilemma, of trying to explain to the early Church who exactly Jesus was, and I respect his efforts to describe who Jesus was understood to be.

But ultimately, ultimately, I am more interested in what Jesus really said, and in what Jesus really did, to reveal for me who Jesus really was, more than any of the descriptions provided later by one of his beloved followers. In the end, I am more interested in following the theology of Jesus, rather than any of those later theologies about Jesus.

Now Christians have been disputing with one another about who Jesus was exactly, from the very beginning. They do so still. And there is still no agreement about who Jesus is even among Christians. Nowadays the preacher on the street corner downtown will ask you pointblank if you have accepted Jesus Christ as 'your personal Lord and Savior', and he will have very specific meanings behind those words, and if you don't understand Jesus exactly like he understands him, then he will tell you that you are not saved. Other Christians will point to the Nicene Creed as the definitive statement of who Jesus was, and if you disagree with that, then you are not considered 'orthodox' (even though a large part of the Christian Church has never accepted that Creed). Christians just cannot seem to agree about how to explain who Jesus really was exactly.

In the Gospels, Jesus was thought of in many different ways. To Nicodemus, he was a teacher come from God (Jn. 3). To the woman of Samaria, he was the man who had told her all that she ever did (Jn. 4.29). To the man born blind, Jesus was the simply one who

restored his sight (Jn. 9.25). To Simon the Pharisee, Jesus was a false prophet (Lk. 7.40). To some he was a glutton and a drunkard, to others Jesus was a friend of tax-collectors and sinners (Mt. 11.19). To the high priest, he was a blasphemer (Mk. 14.64). To the centurion at his crucifixion, he was simply a man of God (Mk. 15.39).

Jesus was called by many names even by his own followers: rabbi, teacher, Lord, prophet, friend, and these sound authentic to me in a way that the "I am" statements do not. Isn't the Christian life in the end, more about following the example of Jesus' life, and his care and concern for others, for the poor, the widow, the marginalized, than trying to find the exact words to define him? Isn't the Christian life more about having a personal relationship with Jesus, than knowing the right metaphor with which to describe him?

Unlike some other religious leaders of that time, and unlike the portrayal of Jesus in John's Gospel, Jesus according to the other Gospels did not make himself the center of his teaching or demand submission or loyalty to himself as a condition of acceptance for admission to the Kingdom of God. ***The religion of Jesus was not about Jesus.*** Jesus' whole mission was with announcing the coming Kingdom of God, with forgiving the penitent and healing the sick. It was not with himself that he was concerned. In fact, this lack of consciousness about himself may

explain the lack of clear language about who he really was, and therefore the very question that Jesus himself poses to his disciples at Caesarea Philippi, asking them "who do men say that I am?"

And in a time when there were so many messianic pretenders, it is intriguing to think that Jesus never clearly accepts even the title of Messiah for himself. Remember in last week's reading when the crowd tried to force Jesus and anoint him as the prophet who is to come, he withdrew and went off by himself. Thus, in the end I wouldn't be at all surprised if Jesus rejected many of these "I am" statements, and any focus on himself. I wouldn't be surprised if Jesus denied himself, for it is recorded elsewhere that Jesus demanded that his disciples deny themselves in order to follow him. Perhaps we too should worry less about what others say about Jesus, or about us, about whether we are orthodox Christians, or whether we are 'real' Christians or not. Does it really matter what words we choose? Isn't the Christian life more about following the example of Jesus' care and concern for others, than trying to find the exact words to describe him? Perhaps we should, like Jesus, not worry about theological titles and scriptural metaphors, and simply get on with the work of the Kingdom of Heaven, struggling then to love our enemies, serve our neighbors, say our prayers, feed the hungry, visit the sick,

strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the
dignity of every human being. AMEN