

Biblical reflection for Partnership for World Mission Conference Nov 2008

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During the last 2 years, one of the pieces of work I have most enjoyed has been working with an international group to prepare the Bible studies that were used at the Lambeth Conference. The team consisted of Gerald West from South Africa, our leader, members from India, Tanzania, New Zealand, the Congo, the United States, and myself from England and the Anglican Communion Office. We were all committed to producing material that enabled the bishops and spouses at the Lambeth Conference to engage with the Bible in a way that allowed them to draw on and share insights gained from their own contexts. I hope – and think – we succeeded, because most of the participants felt that the regular daily session of Bible study was one of the highlights of the Conference.

Archbishop Rowan asked us to take the Gospel of John as the biblical book to base the Bible studies on, but within that overall parameter the team was given freedom to choose exactly which passages to select and what theme we might follow to link them together. We decided to use the 'I am' sayings of the Gospel – but look at them in a slightly different and we hoped fresh way, that offered new insights. When Jesus in John's Gospel refers to himself as 'I am' he seems to be making a connection to the great Old Testament passages in the Book of Exodus where God reveals his name to Moses as 'Yahweh', 'I am who I am'. He is in effect claiming identity with the one whom his people worshipped as God. It is a consistent theme of this particular Gospel.

Most of us, I am sure, are familiar with the great declarations of Jesus such as 'I am the Bread of Life' 'I am the Light of the World', 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life' – what I call the 'I am sayings with a predicate'; but perhaps not everybody realises that there are a considerable number of other 'I am' sayings in the Gospel – which are sometimes half hidden by the English translation, but where in Greek Jesus is also using the same words 'ego eimi', the emphatic 'I am', to speak about himself. And in what I will be sharing with you in the next few minutes I will be focusing in particular on two of these hidden 'I am' statements.

In the past few weeks I have been speaking in a number of different locations about these 'I am' bible studies. I have enjoyed asking people to think about which is the first 'I am' saying in John's Gospel. Some people have mentioned 'I am the Light of the World', others 'I am the Bread of Life'. I have to confess that it is with great glee that I chortle at these responses and tell people that they are wrong. It is certainly true that 'I am the Bread of Life' in chapter 6 is the first 'I am with a predicate' in the Gospel, but in fact there are two earlier 'I am' sayings, which, although they are picked up in the marginal footnotes of many modern translations, are not immediately obvious to the English reader. Let me read you the passage in which the first 'I am' of John's Gospel occurs.

Read John 4.5-26.

'I am, the one who is speaking with you'. That is the first time that Jesus says 'I am' in the Gospel of John. I find it an exhilarating and powerful discovery to realise that the first time that Jesus discloses this divine identity it should be to a person who is a woman, a Samaritan, who was not a member of his own religious community, and someone who was apparently ostracised among her own people. What is this telling us about the nature of God? The disclosure comes at the end of a quite lengthy talk between Jesus and the woman, in which they have discussed theology almost as equals. In the course of their meeting, each have ministered to the other, new life has been offered, barriers have been broken and the vision of a new and deeper relationship between God and human beings, and between human beings themselves has been opened up. And then Jesus says 'I am'.

Let me take you back again to the Old Testament for a moment: to that very point where God discloses his name to Moses. It comes during the encounter between God and Moses at the burning bush, as God is seeking to persuade Moses to return to Egypt to liberate his people from bondage. Moses is more than unwilling – and thinks up excuses not to have to go. As part of his wrangling with God he points out that if he is going to tell the people that 'the God of your ancestors had sent me to you' then the people will respond in turn 'And what is the name of this God'. It is at this moment that God reveals his name. And in doing so he takes an immense risk – for in the religious world of the Old Testament to let your name be known made you vulnerable – it allowed people to control you, to bend you to their will. If that was true for human beings – how much more so for a god. The sweep of the Old Testament makes it clear that God was very hesitant to disclose his name – for precisely such reasons; but now there is no choice; compassion for his people dictates that God must, or else his people would remain forever slaves in Egypt. And so God makes himself vulnerable and allows his name to be known. And yet that enigmatic phrase 'I am who I am' seems deliberately designed to preserve God's sovereign freedom; not to allow human beings to manipulate him as their puppet. The very mystery of the phrase suggests that God's name is ultimately beyond human control and comprehension. It is a name which is a different sort of name. There is a German theologian called Walther Zimmerli who argues that this name that is no name is the thread that lies at the very heart of the Old Testament and draws it together: as Zimmerli puts it 'The God who is invoked by the name 'Yahweh' repeatedly demonstrates his freedom by dashing to pieces all the 'images' in which humanity would confine him. There are many ways that human beings can seek to confine God – we can build him a temple and tell him to live in it, to be available as required; we can seek to insist that he becomes the mere guarantor of an inflexible moral order in which the wicked are always punished and the good are always prosperous. The people of the Old Testament tried all these – and more besides – and the story of the Old Testament tells again and again how God who is the I am who I am, refused to be trapped and held captive by all such neat religious systems and theologies.

It is this I want to remember as we return to John's Gospel and Jesus' first disclosure of 'I am'. It is I think no accident that it is embedded in a passage which speaks so extensively about the barriers that existed between Jews and Samaritans. At the time of Jesus the primary quarrel between the two communities was focused on the two

temples that were the focal buildings of each faith. As the woman said to Jesus, 'Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain – Gerizim – which rises high in the heart of Samaritan territory – while you, the Jews, say that it is in the temple in Jerusalem that people need to worship God.' So two holy places originally erected to venerate God had become focal points for hostility and division as both communities sought to possess God each on its own terms. It had become, if you like, the antithesis of allowing God the freedom to be God, to be Yahweh 'the I am who I am'. It is into the middle of this bitter strife that Jesus reveals himself as 'I am', the very revelation of this name perhaps acting as judgement upon religious communities which sought to domesticate God, to claim that they and they alone had the whole truth, and who by their exclusion of others sought to limit God's freedom to act how, where and when he wishes. It is also no coincidence that the physical symbol that runs through the dialogue between Jesus and the woman is 'living water'. In semitic languages, such as Hebrew, the normal expression for 'running water' - fresh water than comes from a spring rather than still, and possible contaminated, water from a well - is *mayim haim* which literally means 'living water'. The Gospel writer is deliberately punning on the dual possibilities of the expression. So when in verse 10 Jesus offers the woman 'living water', understandably her first thought is of such fresh gushing spring water. But the quality of such water – just as the quality of the 'I am', is that it runs free, it is not under the control of human power. Like the Spirit of God 'living water' will run and blow where it – rather than we –wills.

And yet by God's grace human beings are a central part of this story. Jesus' first words to the woman are 'Give me a drink', expressing his thirst, his need, and asking this apparently unclean woman to meet it. For many Christians in Asia, especially in India, who come from disadvantaged groups and classes and are often treated as unclean in their societies, this encounter expresses the very heart of the Christian Gospel. Significantly it is one of the most depicted gospel stories in Asian Christian art; I am showing a few examples on the screen now. To be willing to receive water from another in such a culture is to show respect to the giver - to break down the barriers between the clean and unclean. So Jesus' engagement with the woman breaks the societal protocols of division and leads to a mutual liberation both for the woman and for himself; his thirst for righteousness is quenched by his valuing of the woman.

:Jean Vanier puts it like this: 'I am' begs for water from one of the most despised and broken women, who is no one, with no name, who is nothing in the eyes of society. Jesus reveals to her who she is and who she will become – a source of the waters of life of God – if she opens up her heart to him and receives his love. Misery and mercy meet in love.'

I do not think there is a better visual expression of this truth than this statue called the 'Water of Life' which is found in the grounds of Chester Cathedral. It offers a profound depiction of the sense of mutuality and interdependence at the heart of the story. Who is ministering to whom? Surely we cannot separate out the giving and receiving – both are dependent each on the other. What a gospel we are being offered!

Each time I look at the picture it takes me deeper into this mystery. I invite you to ponder it for a few minutes while I mention something else. One of the reasons I enjoy

talking to groups of people about the Bible is that often I discover fresh insights from those I am meeting with. So it was a few weeks ago, when I was reflecting on John 4 with a group in Hereford. I had made the comment that I have also made today – about the difference in John's Gospel between the 'I am' sayings with a predicate such as 'I am the bread of life' – and these other - what I call the hidden 'I am' sayings. Then somebody pointed out that one way of translating John 4.26 could suggest that it too includes a predicate 'I am the one talking with you'. And they are quite right. So just as Jesus is elsewhere describing God as the bread of life or the light of the world and identifying himself with those realities, so here he is describing God as 'the one talking with you' – and identifying himself with that expression of divinity. It is a powerful insight, which I am still pondering but it seems to suggest to me that the Gospel is saying that at the very heart of what it means to be God, as Jesus reveals it to us, is God's communication with humanity. It is of the very nature of God to be a God who communicates with his human creation. And this, I remind you, is the very first 'I am' of John's Gospel, so John is saying that this is the fundamental nature of God – upon which all the other things John wants to tell us about God in his Gospel will be based. It does of course link with the way that this Gospel opens with that profound meditation on the Word, the Logos. It is also a significant thought to reflect on here at this conference with its focus on mission: that God's identity is so profoundly linked to his ongoing communication with his human creation. It is an insight that is surely difficult to grasp in its totality – but perhaps that is typical of the unpinnable-downness of the 'I am who I am'.

Let me move on to a few further reflections and in a minute one further picture.

If John 4 offers us the first 'I am' saying of the Gospel then it is interesting to discover what is the last 'I am' saying. Here I am going to cheat – because I want to have two bites at this particular cherry. The last classic 'I am', one with a predicate, comes in John 15, when Jesus tells his disciples during the Farewell discourses, 'I am the true vine'. I find it telling that this should be the culmination of those great 'I am' proclamations, because unlike the earlier predicates, Bread, Light, Gate, Good Shepherd, Way, Resurrection, this last predicated statement includes the disciples. John 15 is at pains to make it clear that the disciples are the branches of this vine. So this last 'I am with a predicate' has a communal aspect. Perhaps it is suggesting to us that the final result of Jesus claiming the right to say of himself 'I am' is that his disciples – ourselves – have a right to share in it too, provided, of course, that we remain attached to Jesus, and through him to each other. That is also an insight to ponder at this mission Conference, perhaps particularly at this time in the life of the Anglican Communion.

But once again, as with John 4, the very last 'I am' saying of John's Gospel may come as a surprise. In fact it doesn't just come once – but three times in quick succession, though as also with John 4, concealed by the traditional English translation. As Jesus is arrested in Gethsemane there is the following exchange between him and his captors: Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'Whom are you looking for? They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth'. Jesus replied 'I am'. ... When Jesus said to them 'I am' they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he

asked them, 'Whom are you looking for?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus answered 'I have told you that I am. So if you are looking for me let these men go.'

Stunning isn't it, this threefold repetition of Jesus' identity as God just at this precise moment in the Gospel – the very point at which the sequence is inexorably set in train which will lead to Jesus' execution and death. Divinity blazes out in the midst of vulnerability, not in spite of vulnerability, but I think John is wanting to say to us – because of it. It is all a part of John's topsy-turviness, of the way that he takes expressions like 'glory' and 'lift up' and gives them a radical twist, linking them to the apparent ignominy of Jesus' death upon a cross, which in John's eyes has become a throne.

And that in turn leads me to the 'I am' which is linked to the final picture I want to show. Those of us working on the Lambeth Conference Bible studies were not infallible – we are Anglicans after all! We discovered that there was one 'I am' statement that was so well hidden that we did not spot it until it was too late to include it in the booklet. But then shortly before the Conference we were asked to put together an extra bible study to help train the bishops and spouses who were going to act as facilitators for the bible study groups, so we got our forgotten 'I am' out of the cupboard and constructed a bible study around it. It comes in the account of how at the last supper he shared with his disciples Jesus washed their feet. And in this particular instance we actually incorporated the picture I am now showing, by the Indian Christ artist Jyoti Sahi, as part of the Bible study. I will not read the whole of the biblical narrative of the foot-washing which I am sure is very familiar to many of you, but I will say that at the close of the story, after Jesus has first washed his disciples' feet and then explained to them why he has done it – as an example to them – the passage concludes with Jesus' words in which he seems to be talking about his death, 'I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that 'I am'. So linking together this act of service and his imminent crucifixion is Jesus' declaration 'I am'.

Take a good look for a moment at Jyoti's picture. One of its striking features is its intensity and intimacy: so much held in such a small space by the heart-like leaf. The image is even more remarkable when we consider that painting comes from a context in which the Dalits of Indian society are forbidden to use the same drinking and washing water as higher castes – and indeed a culture in which the feet – those feet of Peter that Jesus is washing – symbolise the Shudra, the lowest of the caste groups. Set against such a context, for Jesus to wash his disciples' feet overturns all expectations, and as with the story of the woman of Samaria, breaks through and down traditional barriers. There is another resonance with the earlier story which I think Jyoti's picture also captures – that deep sense of mutuality, between Jesus and his disciples. Here Jesus and Peter are entwined each with the other.

Yet one other thing also stands out in this picture – it is the way that Jesus' back has become so flat that it resembles an altar; in these actions Jesus' is consecrating himself, offering himself, making himself altar and sacrifice, becoming the Eucharist in his own body, as a foretaste of what would happen the next day. It is telling that this action is recounted at the point where the other Gospels place the institution of the Eucharist. John's Gospel does not mention such an institution: but perhaps Jesus'

action in washing his disciples' feet is intended to express the spirit of offering and communion that is at the heart of the Eucharist. Quite literally Jesus is telling his disciples while he washes their feet, "Do this in remembrance of me". It is a modelled example for them to follow. They are to wash the feet of each other. That is what love in action is to be, and it is the role of all sent as 'messengers' of Jesus. Jesus promises that those who receive his messengers will receive Jesus himself – but such a promise can only be fulfilled if those self-same messengers are willing to strip themselves in turn to be modelled on the figure of Jesus the Servant.

'I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that 'I am'. John's Gospel leads us deep into the heart of God. And as we draw close, with trepidation and awe, like Moses approaching the burning bush, we discover that 'I am who I am' will not be constrained by our expectations about how God should behave. In the old stories to see God was a terrifying experience, and they said 'You cannot see God and live'. Yet now we learn that it is only when we approach and gaze upon Jesus 'I am' that we can discover the source of life.

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a way as gives us breath;
Such a truth as ends all strife,
Such a life as killeth death.
*Jesus, Lord and Master,
As you once washed the feet of your disciples;
We pray that you will wash our motives,
Our ambitions and our actions,
So that we may share in your mission to the world
And serve each other gladly
For your sake and your glory.
(Prayer based on words of Michael Ramsey)*

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