

Ego Eimi, I AM
Passion Sunday

John 8: 58-“I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, before Abraham was, I am”. It was a simple question from a group of Jews who had been listening to our Lord. They were trying to understand His teaching and to the extent that they could, trying to understand who He was and where He was from. The comments that are directed to Jesus from the Jews are statements of self justification and challenge. Here the Jews talk of their relationship to God through Abraham who they refer to as their father. To them the law, their culture, their practices, their traditions and their religious beliefs are the paramount structure of their relationship with God. But our Lord knew their hearts and their sins. He knew their unfaithfulness and saw many times they had chosen their own ways instead of God’s ways. It was for this reason that He was sent to mankind, to free us from our own inability to be right with God, to free us from that which perpetually separates us from God, our sin. He was the one promised in the Scripture of the Old Testament, yet as He stood before them, they continued to question His claim-that He was the Messiah sent to redeem mankind.

Ego Eimi, Greek for I AM-we have heard this before and so had they. In Exodus Moses comes to the burning bush in fear and God speaks to Him. (Exodus 3) “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” God tells Moses to go to Egypt and to lead His people out of bondage to a land He promises will be filled with milk and honey. Moses realizes this will be no small task but God assures him that He will be with Moses. Moses asks God a question, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them-The god of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me what is His name? What shall I tell them? God said to Moses “I am who I am, This is what you are to say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you.”

“I AM the Lord your God,” I am your heavenly Father, I am the creator of the universe, I am the one who has chosen you to be my children. These sentiments are echoed throughout Holy Scripture. “You are my witnesses, declares the Lord,” in the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 43:10), “and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.” God declares who He is, to the people of Israel, to the prophets and even to each one of us today. And as Moses anticipated that question from the Israelites, so was asked the same question of Jesus. “Who are you, who sent you?” His answer to both questions was “I AM.”

Over and over again Jesus is asked who He is and what He was asking of them. “I am the bread of life”, he declares “I am the bread that came down from heaven”. And what is it that God wants from us, what work would God have us do that we are not doing already? He is asked. “The work of God is this: to believe in the one that He has sent.” He was God’s word come to us in the flesh-that we should believe and through God’s grace and our faith, receive pardon from all of our sins and have eternal life. Our Lord was of the Father, from the beginning. St. John again “In the beginning was the word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”

That indeed was the challenge before the Jews who were talking to Jesus. They stood before Him, proud and full of self righteousness; We are Abraham’s children-we are the chosen of God, we do all that is asked of us. And Jesus knowing their hearts tells them no-they are the children of the devil. They sin, they do not love God they may do all the rituals and go to the temple and do what the law asks of them, but in their hearts they do not believe, they do not fear God, they are not committed to God in their desire to do good. They had become servants of the law, acting as they should but there was no truth in them. Their religion had more to do with tradition than with a true, deep, personal relationship with God.

These Jews felt entitled to the benefits of the eternal kingdom that was to be established by the Messiah through the mere fact that they were Jews. Our Lord confronts them and tells them that salvation can only be achieved by them through their repentance, faith and the keeping of God’s words and commandants. Jesus is telling them that everything they thought was true was not, that if they truly loved God, that they would be totally committed to Him with a sincere heart.

What is their reaction? They want to know by whose authority He has the right to say these things, to tell them they are wrong. He answers them by telling them about His authority and how He comes from the Father. He tells them that if you believe what He is saying and take to heart what He says, “they will not see death.” But their hearts are hardened and they accuse Him of being possessed by a demon. Abraham was their father, they were descendants of Abraham, and like him, they were blessed. Yet as great as he was, even Abraham saw death—was He greater than that?

And in a clear and definitive statement of His divinity, He looks at them and says “Before Abraham was, I AM!” Here is their God before them, incarnate as a man, bringing them the truth of salvation. And then, they raise their hands, not in praise, but with stones, seeking to kill Him.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews in this morning's Epistle makes a point that the Jews in the gospel failed to recognize. The old relationship between God and His people was being replaced by a new relationship through Jesus Christ. That the dead works of man would be set aside by the living service of Christ that would be brought about by His sacrifice for us on the cross. Christ was setting aside the old covenant between God and man and bringing a new covenant through faith and God's grace. But they would not accept that the works of the law fell far short of God's expectations. That the eternal redemption they were expecting from God would only come through His son. As St. John writes “He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world knew Him not.”

We get life from the death of Jesus. His dying on the cross is His gift to us for our redemption. And it is demonstrated for us in His triumph over death through His resurrection on Easter morning. His desire for us is that each of us be given eternal life through His grace. That we share in His breaking the bonds of death. A beautiful and loving gift that we receive through our own, heartfelt, faith.

When God looks into each of our hearts what does He see? We are faithful we say, we believe, we serve the church and each other, we worship and pray. Yet what is in our hearts? Do we fully understand the Christ of the Gospel and the message that He was giving not only to the Jews of His day but to each of us today?

A great priest of the church once told me that one of the great mistakes a new clergyman makes when He begins His service to God is the assumption that churches are full of Christians. He sees the politics, hears the augments, sees the lack of commitment and often how far man can get away from God. He asks over and over again one simple question “Where is Christ in all of this?” This in turn brings us to the same question for each of us that Jesus asks of Peter “Do you love me?” Is our love for God real or do we, like the Jews in the Gospel, just go through the motions.

Passion Sunday, the beginning of the next two weeks which we refer to as Passiontide, gives us an opportunity to pause and look at what our Lord is about to go through for each of us. In the weeks ahead we will recall the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the sharing in the Lord's Last Supper, the betrayal of our Lord, His agony in the garden, His arrest, trial, scourging, pitiful march to Calvary and finally His gruesome hanging and death on the cross. This is for us His act of supreme love through His passion and His death.

While it is Lent that helps us reflect on our unworthiness and all the things that separate us from God, it is our Lord's passion that brings into focus all that God is willing to do for us through His immeasurable love for each of us. As our Lord tells us “He who belongs to God, hears what God says.”

I AM! I am the Lord your God, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, I am the one who He has sent, I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world. I AM is a statement of faith that goes to the heart of our belief and our commitment to God. I am asks of each of us—do we believe that God is who He says He is. If indeed we say yes, are we moved to obey His commands, worship in spirit and truth, study His word and glorify Him in everything we do?

The Jews of Scripture fell into a trap. They made what attempts they could to follow the law as given them by Moses and the prophets. Yet it was not their false obedience to God he wanted as much as He wanted

their faithfulness. In Christ's coming to us, God expresses the depth of His love for us through Christ's teachings, His passion and His dying on the cross. He shows us His power and glory through Jesus' resurrection and through His grace sets before us pardon and eternal life. We are made righteous with Him not through our practice or works but through our faith. It is that faith that should move us to come before God with a penitent heart, joyful thanksgiving, seeking nourishment through the Holy Sacrament of the Altar and to in all things seek to Glorify God in our actions and our commitment to Him in thanksgiving for His commitment to us.

Like Christmas, we will soon all be caught up in the retail push of the season. Spring is here, a time for flowers and chocolate, bonnets and bunnies, spring cleaning and new diets. In our secular world, we find ourselves challenged by all that surrounds us to be faithful to God. That world has taken away the importance of our religious observance by replacing Christ on the cross with a rabbit and a basket full of eggs. So like the Jews, who our Lord calls the children of the devil because their actions are insincere, and are just going through the motions of being faithful, we find ourselves often drawn away from what should be first and most important in our lives-true, deep and heartfelt faith in God.

I AM the Lord thy God, thou shalt have no other Gods before me. St. Paul's message in the Epistle is one of reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. "How much more then will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God. For this reason, Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance."

We are called-we are called to be faithful, we are called to set aside the ways of the world, we are called to be penitent, we are called to be committed, we are called to be trusting and we are called to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and all our mind and all our soul, and our neighbors as ourselves. As we walk with our Lord to Calvary, let us with unfailing hearts desire to focus on what He is about to go through for mankind out of His deep love for each and every one of us. If we truly believe He is who He says He is, then how can we not be moved to give all of who we are to Him, to Him who says, I AM.