

10/01/2016 Evening Service - UP Series 'Before Abraham was, I am'

Good evening, and welcome to our first evening service in the hall! It feels a lot closer and more intimate, which I think really works well for the evening service.

Tonight we're continuing our UP series, focussing on the Gospel of John as we did for the IN series, and looking at the 'I AM' sayings. The 'UP' series is to help us to understand more of who God is and why He is worthy of our praise.

Now, there are 7 times in John where Jesus says 'I AM...' and then something about himself, and they are all pretty well known - 'I am the good shepherd', 'I am the light of the world', 'I am the resurrection and the life' etc - but our series is ten weeks long. So, what are we doing in the other three weeks?

Well, my very clever wife has found three other, interesting uses of 'I am' by Jesus in John, which we are spending these first few weeks on. They don't fit into the formula that the other 7 conform to; either they don't start with 'I am', like our verse today, or the 'I am' used isn't the specific Greek phrase 'ego eimi' which we'll talk about later, and it is that category that last weeks and next weeks verses fall into. However, they do all give us a deeper insight into Jesus' holiness, his divinity.

So, our passage today comes relatively soon after Louise's passage from last week. Jesus is in conversation with the same group of Jews, and he's still really riling them up! He's told them that they are children of the devil and not of Abraham, but that He belongs to God; he's told them about eternal life for those who believe in him which they have scoffed at; and they have just called him 'demon possessed'. And here comes our passage, John 8:54-59.

READ JOHN 8:54-59

Normally, I like to go through a passage verse by verse, but there is so much in today's that that would take about 5 times longer than I actually have, so instead I'm going to focus on our main verse, verse 58, 'Before Abraham was born, I am!'. Here, all his claims that he made about himself earlier in the chapter come to a head, and it becomes too much for the Jews so they try and stone him.

So, why did they want to stone him? Was it because he mixed up his tenses, because of his bad grammar? Were they some sort of Jewish pedant club? No, they were outraged because he said the words 'I AM'.

The reason for this goes right the way back to Exodus, verse 3:14. When Moses was talking to God in the burning bush, looking for a way to get out of leading the Israelites, he asks God "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?". In 3:14, God replies "I-AM-WHO-I-AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I-AM has sent me to you.'"

The Greek words that Jesus uses here at the end of chapter 8 are 'ego eimi', which are as close to a direct translation as you can get from the Hebrew 'I-AM' uttered by God in Exodus to NT Greek. So Jesus was literally using the name of God for himself; he was claiming that he was one with God. The Jews didn't want him dead because he said that he existed before Abraham and they thought he was a nutter - it was because in their eyes he was blaspheming, and Leviticus 24:16 says 'anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord must be put to death'.

The Jews thought that Jesus was blaspheming, but we know that he wasn't - we know that He never lies, not once, but that he IS one with the Father. This greek translation of 'I am', 'ego eimi', is used in all the 7 well known 'I am's. His use of it here is why the Jews almost kill him; it's why, when approached by Judas, the soldiers and the priests in the Garden of Gethsemane, to answer

their question of who was Jesus of Nazareth, everyone falls to the ground when he declares 'I am he'. It is because there is power in the name of Jesus, in the name of God.

But there is still far more to that one sentence of Jesus' than this. We, as English readers in the 21st century, can find his use of tenses hard to understand. Why wasn't it translated 'Before Abraham was born, I was'? Wouldn't that make a lot more sense to us?

It is because he is fully God, one with the Father, as we have just said. In Revelation, Jesus declares multiple times that he is the First and the Last, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He himself HAS no beginning and no end - because he is God, he is immutably the same, forever unchanging, throughout the whole of time itself. To say 'I was' or 'I will be' makes no sense for him. He is, always. And this means that his faithfulness, his grace, his mercy, his love, his sacrifice, is unwavering - now and forever. Our relationship with God through Jesus is going to be entirely different to any other relationship we have because of this, because people do change. They have off-days, they can get moody or grumpy, you can feel like you're walking on egg-shells with them, but we have none of that with God. When you sin and come to him for forgiveness for what feels like the millionth time, he'll never say 'Sorry XXX, I'm afraid you've had one too many cream cakes this time. There's no forgiveness for you from me today' - that will NEVER happen, because he is always loving, and always willing to forgive.

Back to the verse, there's even more we can get from it. He declared to the Jews that 'Before Abraham was born, I AM'. Notice that he didn't say 'Before Abraham was born, but after Adam, I AM' - he didn't put a restriction on how far before Abraham existed did he exist. This is again because he is God, and if he is God, forever unchanging, he must have existed at the beginning of time himself, with the Father who created and the Spirit who 'hovered over the waters'. John says this very thing himself at the start of his Gospel - 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' - this Word being Jesus, who is the living Word of the Father.

This idea is sometimes called by theologians 'the pre-existent Christ', which means that Jesus existed before the incarnation, before he came to Earth as a baby. I find it incredible reading the Old Testament with this in mind, because I find that I approach it so differently.

Compare Exodus 33:19-20 to Exodus 24:9-11 for example. Exodus 33:19-20 is the well-known passage where God hides Moses in a cleft in the rock so that Moses can't see His face. The Lord says: 'I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see my face and live."

But then have a read of Exodus 24:9-11 - Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. Be God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and then ate and drank.

So how can Moses see and eat and drink with God, standing there with them, and then be told that he cannot see his face and live? It only seems to make sense if God in the first passage is the Father, and in the second passage is the Son.

What about other places in the Old Testament? When Jacob wrestles with God, God is in human form and Jacob can see him and wrestle with him - is this Jesus too? Or when the angel of the Lord appears but uses the words 'I' rather than 'the Lord' - could that be Jesus as well? Or in 1 Samuel 3, when God calls to Samuel in the temple the Bible says that 'The Lord came and stood there' while he was talking to Samuel - is this Jesus also? We know that Jesus had human form here on earth, and if he is unchangeable then does he have human form before the incarnation as well? If so, then any appearances of God in human form in the Old Testament could be Jesus.

Now, there are many ways these different passages can be taken and I'm not saying that this is definitely Jesus appearing as God in the Old Testament - I'm saying that we need to recognise that Jesus is around, with God, in the Old Testament because he is fully God himself, which means that if we pay attention we may be able to catch a glimpse of him.

There's one final point I want to make before I finish, which is that this idea of Jesus pre-existing is SO Johanine, so John. The Gospel of John, at the very beginning, has Jesus in Heaven, one with the father. There's no birth narrative in John either, no nativity - Jesus simply turns up to John the Baptist to be baptised - he has no Earthly beginning because he has no Heavenly beginning.

So, what does all this pre-existence, Jesus as fully God mean to us today? Going back to what I said at the beginning, the reason that we are doing this UP series is to increase our understanding of God to help us praise and worship him better. So how can we praise God better from what we've learned tonight?

Knowing that Jesus was around with God at the beginning of creation, always is, was, and will be, gives us more insight into God. It means that sending Jesus to die on the cross was ALWAYS the plan from the very beginning - Revelation describes him as the 'Lamb that was slain from the beginning of the world'. Jesus sacrifice wasn't just a way to patch up Israel's mistakes; it was an intricate masterpiece, a plan woven throughout all of God's interactions with humans, revealed in the Old Testament and culminating in Jesus ultimate victory on the cross against sin and death.

It also shows us how much greater a cost Jesus paid than we can ever imagine. He didn't just pay for us on the cross, but he paid for us by choosing to leave heaven and come to earth, to be born in a stable and to live a fully human life, with all its struggles, temptations and hardships. And then, he died on the cross in our place. Knowing of his pre-existence, his being with the Father before he was with us on the earth, helps us understand his sacrifice for us even more, and through that his love for us.

So, I hope you go away from today glorying more in God's great love and wisdom, thinking more on Jesus sacrifice and what that meant for him, and maybe even approach reading the Old Testament just a little bit differently.

When preparing for tonight, I read an essay Kath wrote on the pre-existence of Christ, which showed me that there is so much in the Bible about this - 2 Peter 1:11 speaks of the 'eternal kingdom of Christ', which to be eternal must exist at the beginning as well as the end of time;