

St James' Church, Weybridge

Trinity 11, Proper 14 – 11 August 2024

"I am." (John 6:35)

"I am what I am, I am my own special creation! So, come take a look - give me the hook or the ovation!" No, I will not sing it for you, because I could not do the song justice. But hearing Dame Shirley Bassey sing this live, at the London Television Studios (what was LWT on the south bank) was a very memorable moment. She had just celebrated her 80th birthday, which the programme was celebrating, and her voice was just amazing.

From a 1953 touring variety show entitled, 'Memories of Al Jolson' to her Boxing Day special in 2017, Shirley has kept people entertained and enthralled, not least with her three Bond theme songs. But the lyrics of *'I am what I am'* by the American composer and lyricist Jerry Herman (born July 10, 1931) stand out. They speak of identity as well as fragility. Have you ever asked yourself that question, *"Who am I?"*

How we answer is shaped by all sorts of factors, but it is one we all ask at some stage in life, sometimes many times over. As Christians we conclude that we can only be the people that God has made us to be for we are not simply a product of our genetics and upbringing and the culture that pervades upon us – we are also people loved by God.

As an Inclusive Church, we recognise our diversity and individuality as being good, God inspired and a blessing. For God has not intended Christians to be clones, diversity is at the heart of everything created and God sees it is good.

For when God chose to come among us in first century Palestine, in human form, to share in our lives and our struggles, it was clear that no amount of culture could shape the Lord of life and love or divert him from his God-inspired task of salvation, however much people tried. Jesus' statement "*I am*" in today's Gospel, is a bold claim because He is God's very presence among the people, whether they like it, or not. He is the person God has made him to be, the promised Emmanuel – God with us.

In John's Gospel, our Lord is recorded using seven 'I am' sayings including, "*I am the light of the world,*" and "*I am from above.*" He says, "*I am the gate for the sheep,*" and "*I am the good shepherd.*" He looks to the future and says, "*I am the resurrection and the life*" as well as, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*" He promises to feed us spiritually and says, "*I am the true vine.*" And in today's Gospel reading, "*I am the bread of life.*"

Each time he makes an "I am" statement, it is highly inflammatory for his listeners and certainly dangerous for himself, with the religious elite and powerful deeply troubled by His words and their meaning. In Chapter 8 Jesus claims: "*before Abraham was, I am!*" Consequently, we are told, the crowd pick up stones to throw at Him! Then in chapter 10 Jesus says: "*I am in the Father*" and the religious authorities try to arrest him. How to make friends and influence people! But Jesus is not concerned with celebrity status or pretence. He does not need to fit in. He is the very person God has made him to be – incarnation.

These "*I am*" sayings lead to a place of vulnerability because they reveal everything we need to know about Jesus, and his identity. They speak of his God given authority, with echoes of the Old Testament and God's very divine and holy name, the "I AM". Think about Moses and the burning bush, when God instructs this fledgling leader to gather up the Israelites and lead them out of Egypt.

Moses is overawed by this task – who would not be, and he shrinks from it. He questions God’s call to him with the words, *“Who am I?”* He rightly fears that if he tells the Israelites the God of their ancestors has sent him, they will ask: *“What is his name?”* So, Moses asks God, *“If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”* God said to Moses, *“I am who I am.”* And then, *“Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’”* (Exodus 3: 13b-14)

“I am” claims Jesus! No wonder the religious leaders of his time thought Jesus was effectively claiming to be God – with hindsight we can see his claim is true, as God’s Son, part of the Trinity of love. For people to accept the truth about Jesus they need more, they look for words in action. They need feeding, spiritually, they need to be taught and to understand, and we are no different today.

Jesus says to them, *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* (John 6:35)

They complain, mutter, moan, and gossip (it sounds a bit like some discussions and responses at General Synod!) They pour scorn on our Lord saying, *“Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”*

Jesus continues, *“This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”* (John 6: 50,51)

What Jesus offers them is so amazing, so wonderful – the gift of eternal life no less. But they are get caught up with their own blindness and religiosity. He pledges them spiritual nourishment and he is so committed to revealing who he is fully in their presence that he is willing to give his very body for them. And we know how that ends, with the Cross and his agonising death but the salvation that only God could offer. The point of coming among us, a new relationship of forgiveness and love.

Surely, if Jesus can be completely honest about who he is and offer everything of himself for the sake of others, then we, his disciples and followers today should be willing to do the same, to sing out loud and clear with Shirley Bassey and all people of faith, *“I am what I am?”* So, who are we, here at St James’ Church Weybridge in 2024?

Friends, we are a pilgrim people; whose journey is with the Lord of Life who feeds us with his very presence when we study his Word, the bible, and when we gather around the altar, the table at the heart of our worship to break the bread. But we are more; we are diverse, multi-generational and fearfully and wonderfully made! (Psalm 139: 14)

That diversity is our strength as our Christian action is to go out, filled with knowledge and spiritual refreshment. *“Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.”*

We are a pilgrim people – we go *“In the name of Christ, Amen!”*

To be a Christian is to be on a journey, following the great ‘I AM’ who calls us into his very presence to be renewed and strengthened that we may then be sent to serve and minister his love to others. This is discipleship and it looks slightly different for each one of us, using our various gifts and talents for the kingdom.

Jesus reveals who he is to us, that we may be caught up into the very life of discipleship that transforms and heals, renews, and reshapes, that we may be the people God has made us to be and share our faith, our joy with others.

In return we commit ourselves to regular, faithful and honest worship, prayer and celebration as we gather here at St James' and then, built up through the Scriptures and Sacraments, we go back out into the world to sing from the rooftops, *"I am what I am – a person of faith, forgiven, fed and renewed by the Lord of life and loved by God who made me and saved me! And his name... the great I am!"*

If you are unsure of your spiritual identity, if you question God's love for you, if you find worship difficult to commit to or the faith hard going, or If you question the identity of Jesus or your worthiness to be loved by God, then you really need to take part in our Faith Confirmed Course this autumn.

If you know someone who struggles to say, *'I am what I am'* then bring them with you to Church, to Faith Confirmed. We will meet here in Church on a Tuesday evening at 7:30pm this Autumn (starting 10th September).

Because Jesus is the great 'I AM' and God does love you to the very core of your being. So do not be afraid to be you – the very best kind of you that you can be, because that is the you Jesus died for. That is the you, our Lord has redeemed. That is the you, that God loves beyond all measure and made you to be you. May we all have the faith and courage to recognise God in our lives and sing out with Shirley, *"I am what I am, I am my own special creation!"* Indeed, you are! Amen.

Revd Father Damian Harrison-Miles, August 2024