

the **'I AM'** sayings

mighty and majestic or crazy and confused?

The aim of these guides is to do some thinking about Jesus before Christmas. Advent is confusing! We get ready for the coming of someone who has already come! So this Advent Guide is not about getting ready for a baby in the stable, but meeting the man who risked everything by the way he chose to describe himself.

The inspiration for this theme has been the 'I am' calligraphic artwork dedicated to God on Advent Sunday and displayed in the St John's Chapel.

Are you ready to take another look at the 'I AM' man? If you do, you'll peer into the stable with new vision and insight.

what's needed?

- Bible
- about 30 mins of your time
- being up for a challenge

available on
www.stgileschurch.co.uk

Week 1 – The 'I AM' man

Here's an extract from a sermon:

"Metaphor Man"
Scott Hoezee

Most, if not all, of us see ourselves as real people with literal, descriptive identities. For instance, I am a pastor, a husband, a father, a committee member, a volunteer, a son--these are all straightforward descriptions of who I am in relation to the people around me in life. Like most of you, I cannot readily conceive of myself as a symbol for something, as a kind of metaphor that represents something beyond myself.

Indeed, if someone came up to you at a party and said, "You are my shelter from the storm's of life," well, you'd be taken aback. Then again, if you met someone who constantly spouted self-referential metaphors, you'd deem that individual a few tomatoes short of a thick sauce. We expect people to denote themselves by saying things like, "I am a plumber" or "I teach school" or "I'm a stay-at-home Dad." But our eyes would widen some if someone said, "I am the oil that lubes my company's machine" or "I am the antibody that shields my family from the viruses of secularism."

This is not a terribly typical mode of discourse--not now and really not in Jesus' day, either. Yet Jesus, according to John's gospel at least, did with some frequency refer to himself in a metaphorical mode. Not surprisingly, he got into trouble and arched many eyebrows each time he did this. Over the course of church history Jesus' famous "I AM" sayings have become the much-loved subject of many beautiful hymns, songs, poems, and stained glass windows..... We find these sayings rich in meaning and pastorally comforting. But it was not necessarily that way for the folks who first heard these words.

'it was hard teaching that no one could figure out'

In fact, if you look at the wider context of the "I AM" sayings in John, you will find that in most cases Jesus' original

uttering of these words landed him in swift trouble. After saying, "I am the bread of life," Jesus left most of his disciples scratching their heads, complaining that it was a "hard teaching" that no one could figure out. As a result, that first "I AM" saying caused a good number of Jesus' followers to give up on him. They left! After saying, "I am the light of the world who illumines all," the Pharisees derided Jesus. They said that Jesus could not illumine anything or anyone and he surely was shedding no light on his own identity. After claiming "I am the good shepherd," the crowds denounced Jesus as a lunatic, saying he was full of a demon and so was "raving mad." And after the most lovely of all the sayings, "I am the resurrection and the life," the case against Jesus was cinched and the chief priests swiftly set into motion the judicial wheels that would shortly get Jesus arrested and executed.

Make your choice, C.S. Lewis once said: embrace Jesus as the God and Lord of your life or squirrel him away with the rest of history's weirdos. But please don't bore the world with all this blather that although not divine or particularly special, Jesus was a very fine ethical teacher who had a striking way with words. Either Jesus really was God in the flesh or he was as loony as a man who walked around claiming to be a poached egg.

If Jesus said these things without also being God, then he was not a good man: he was either a devious deceiver or a nut. But down along the ages

Christians have believed that Jesus did say these things but that he was neither devious nor insane. Instead, what these sayings teach us is not just that Jesus is God, they also tell us more about who God is.

So many of these metaphors have rich Old Testament echoes: manna in the desert, the original light of creation, God the Shepherd of his sheep Israel, the promise of vines heavy with grapes, the over-arching Old Testament promise of a rich life in a land flowing with the juices and fatness of Eden. Taken together the "I AM" sayings tell us that everything anyone could have ever wanted, every good thing that God has ever promised, is coming to its fullness in Jesus.

But again, that could only be true if Jesus were God. And as many scholars have noted, the sheer number of times that Jesus so emphatically referred to himself as "I am" is itself very likely an echo of God's personal name as he first disclosed it to Moses at the burning bush. "You tell Israel that I AM sent you."

At the outset this evening we remarked on the difficulty most of us would have thinking of ourselves metaphorically. Jesus did not have that difficulty, not because he was a bit strange but simply because he knew that within himself and within the fullness of the Father and the Holy Spirit there can be found such immense riches, such multi-layered goodness, such galactic power that there is virtually no end to

the ways by which Jesus could try to convey all that in ways we could grasp. The shepherding care and love of God, the zestful and effervescent eternal life that bubbles up at the center of God, the life-sustaining nutrients God's Spirit feeds our souls, the creation-affirming energy of God: it was all here on this earth in the person of Jesus from Nazareth.....

We need this metaphor man who is himself no metaphor at all: he really just is the bread to fill our empty and growling souls. He really just is the light that gives us more than a few rays of hope in the valley of death's shadow. He really just is the shepherd who leads us in the way and the truth, giving us the resurrection life.....

‘every good thing that God has ever promised, is coming to its fullness in Jesus’

One day Jesus' friend Martha met Jesus outside her home. Her face was mottled and blotchy from crying, her eyes sagging with bags and bloodshot from so many salty tears. Her chest heaved with the kind of sobs you usually associate with a little child who bumped her head and now can't quite stop crying from the pain and the fright. Into those pathetic, heart-wrenching snuffles Jesus dared to say, "I am the resurrection and the life--do you believe this?" Jesus spoke in a metaphor but Martha answered with the plain, literal truth: "Yes, because you're the Son of God."

Thinking, acting and praying:

Here are the seven 'I AM' sayings. Which of these grabs your attention? Turn up the whole section in John's Gospel and consider what aspect of God's identity Jesus was revealing in this passage.

I am the bread that gives life! No one who comes to me will ever be hungry. No one who has faith in me will ever be thirsty.

John 6:35

I am the light of the world! Follow me, and you won't be walking in the dark. You will have the light that gives life.

John 8:12

I am the gate for the sheep.

John 10:7

I am the good shepherd, and the good shepherd gives up his life for his sheep.

John 10:11

I am the one who raises the dead to life! Everyone who has faith in me will live, even if they die. And

everyone who lives because of faith in me will never really die.

John 11:25-26

I am the way and the truth and the life.

John 14:6

I am the true vine and the father is my gardener.

John 15:1

As the identity of Jesus unfolded in John's Gospel, people became more surprised, challenged and in some cases, offended.

- What aspect of Jesus' identity have you re-discovered or discovered for the first time this week? What is your reaction to him?
- Jesus calls us to follow him – what change this week do you need to make in the light of the 'I AM' saying you have been considering?

Prayer Suggestion:

Think of a desperate situation in our world and pray for more of the 'I AM' characteristic of God you have been thinking about to be present and active in that situation.

The 'I AM' artwork will be available in the St John's Chapel for viewing and contemplation as from the first week of Advent.

Also available is an information sheet about the 'I AM' sayings with artist's notes prepared by Tim Noad.