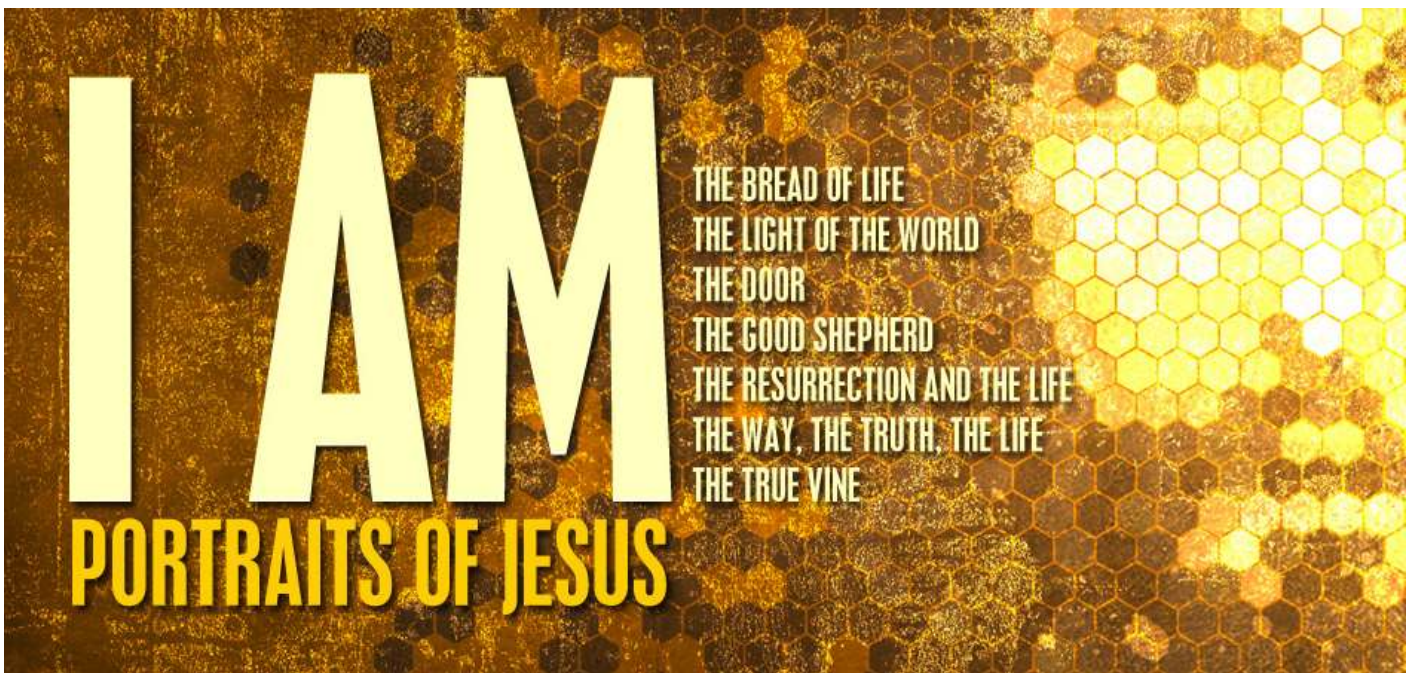


# 'I AM'

## Sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John.



(Image: <http://lakesidebaptistchurch.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/i-am-sermon-series-header.jpg>)



North Balwyn Uniting Church,  
Rev. Anneke Oppewal,  
August-October 2015

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NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH - SUNDAY 2 AUGUST 2015

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Psalm 78: 21-30, John 6: 24-35

"The Bread of Life"

In the next couple of weeks we will be exploring the "I am" sayings of Jesus as we find them in the gospel of John, to discover a little bit more about who the gospel of John tells us Jesus is. The "I am" sayings are unique to the gospel of John and there are seven of them:

I am the bread of life, John 6: 35, 48

I am the light of the world, John 8: 12, 9:5

I am the door, John 10:9

I am the good shepherd, John 10:11

I am the resurrection and the life, John 11:25

I am the way, the truth, and the life, John 14:6

I am the true vine, John 15:1

Some scholars have added "Before Abraham was, I am", John 8: 58 to this list and connected it with the words from John 1: In the beginning was the Word. Although that opens up some interesting connections, I think we will, for now, not complicate things and stay with the seven generally accepted ones.

These seven statements, as I said, are unique to the gospel of John. They tell us something about what the writer of the gospel of John believed Jesus to be, not what Jesus himself may, or may not have believed about himself. It is John's Christology, John's understanding of Jesus that comes through in these statements.

The general consensus among scholars, and I think it is important to have this clear from the beginning of this whole series of sermons, is that it is highly unlikely that Jesus himself ever uttered these sentences or anything like them. It is the writer of the gospel who puts these statements into Jesus' mouth as he tries to convey to his audience who and what Jesus is for him and for his community and, consequently, what he thinks Jesus should be for you and me as we read his gospel.

The seven statements are all highly stylised, laden with reference and charged with deeper meaning. They are core statements from where, like lava from a volcano, or rays of sunlight from the sun, the gospel truth of who and what Jesus was is further explored and filled in throughout the gospel. The context of the statement, the words immediately before and after infusing and infused by those core words, is explaining, interpreting and filling out what the writer of John is trying to convey about him.

They are focus points from where what there is to know and understand about Jesus, according to the writer of the gospel, radiates into the story and beyond.

So: Not words of Jesus, but words of the faith community who, after his death, try to put into words what the continuing experience of Jesus' presence means to them.

Last week, when we read the story leading up to the first statement, the statement about Jesus being the bread of life, we discovered that even there, in the lead up, every word, every dot point and comma, every sentence was pregnant with reference and meaning.

The text this week is as multilayered and multifaceted as the one we discussed last week. There is a whole host of quotes and connections under the surface, ready to take us deeply into the scriptures and propel us beyond the present into the heart of God's dreams and future hopes for the world.

The gospel of John is like that, with a whole universe of connections and understanding hiding behind every word and every phrase.

Today I want to focus on the statement, to see what it might tell us, here and now, about Jesus and what the writer of John might be able to tell us about our faith, our relationship with Jesus, and his importance for our lives today, here and now.

The way I see it, these seven statements offer us seven ways in, seven points of connection, seven ways to get our head around this Jesus guy and what difference he might be able to make to our lives.

Today's statement: 'I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.' is preceded by the two stories we discussed last week -the story of Jesus feeding five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, and Jesus' walk on water.

As we have talked about before, the story of the feeding of the five thousand resonates with references to other bread stories in the scriptures - particularly to the story about manna raining from heaven in the wilderness, when the people of God are on their way to the promised land after they have been liberated from slavery in Egypt. There is, however, much more than that. There is reference to other bread stories, stories about such giants as Abraham, Jacob, David, Elijah and Elisha among them.

The story of Jesus walking on water resonates with Moses parting the sea for his people on their way to freedom, and with Joshua leading God's people across the river Jordan into the promised land. These connect this part of the gospel again, and more closely, to the Exodus, Moses, Joshua and the journey of God's people out of slavery, through the wilderness to the promised land. There is also reference to Genesis 1 and the Spirit of God hovering over the waters of chaos at the beginning of creation, and there are references to the prophets, in particular to the books of Jonah and Ezekiel.

This illustrates that this statement of Jesus is embedded in a wider context, is prepared, foreshadowed by a wide array of reference and inference and will be followed by it as well. It does not come out of the blue, it has been in the air for a while and it will linger like the taste of freshly baked bread will linger long after we have eaten our fill.

"I am". Weren't those the words Moses heard when God introduced himself to him in the desert in Exodus 3?

Moses, confronted by a voice from a burning bush, asks 'Who are you?', and God responds, saying: 'I am who I am', adding a little bit later 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob and I have heard my people cry'. In other words, I am going to do something about it.

Seven times John has Jesus repeat this "I am", seven times he puts these words in Jesus' mouth. "I am"- connecting Jesus to the God that called Moses to liberate God's people and to the

long history of God with his people- connecting him so intimately in fact, that it is hard to tell the difference.

When Jesus speaks, when Jesus acts, when Jesus interacts with the world, according to the writer of John, we see, in essence, what happened in Exodus, happening again. It is that same God that called Moses in the desert speaking, acting and interacting with the world again. That same God is liberating, parting the sea, taking the power from the forces of oppression and death and transforming what seem dead end streets into passable roads to liberty and salvation, taking things even further this time, closer, deeper, and more radical. 'I am" no longer a mysterious disembodied voice, but flesh and blood.

'I am the bread of life' says Jesus, and immediately, all the bread stories that will still be fresh in everyone's mind after reading the feeding of the five thousand, will be activated like yeast in a dough- Bread of life, bread from heaven, manna, more than enough, a land of plenty on a green hill, the tree of life bearing fruit. It's all there, and because the careful preparation of the reader in the preceding verses, it all springs to mind immediately and spontaneously.

At the same time, as a sustaining note running underneath the complex melody of the variety of all these stories and references is what we all know, and what was probably even more true in Jesus' day than it is in ours: Bread is staple food. It's something people eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner. There is nothing special about it, except perhaps that it is so ubiquitously used as a staple. It is an everyday food that comes in many shapes and sizes all over the world. Wherever people live and have some flour and some water, they can put them together and bake bread in an oven.

The metaphor in that sense holds a profound paradox:

On the one hand the bread of life is connected to the manna from heaven that rained down in the desert, to Elisha being fed by the ravens when he was at his lowest, to David looking for nurture and shelter when he was on the run from Saul, to the tree of life bearing fruit and to many other stories. At the same time bread is staple food, the day to day that people need and Jesus provides - not gourmet, not artisan, not 5 star restaurant food, but staple food, ordinary, day to day, hearty, healthy, wholesome food that can be eaten with anything at any time.

I am that, the writer of the gospel has Jesus say. I am that bread. The manna from heaven, bread you don't have to work for, nurture and nourishment from God's hand to sustain you as you travel through the wilderness of life, as well as the day to day food that most of the time you won't even think about eating, that comes in many guises and sustains you and keeps you going on a daily basis.

'Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty'.

These words imply that there is more to it than just holding out our hands and waiting to receive the bread. We need to come and we need to believe, for this bread to do its work, for it to feed and sustain us.

Coming to Jesus involves, for most of us, a change of direction. It is not something that comes naturally. Believing in him, making his way and his life our own is something we need to work towards, need to make choices about and only if we do that will we receive the nurture of the bread that he can be for us.

Presenting Jesus as the bread of life, the gospel writer challenges us to think about what we eat, what we choose to nourish us, where we come to be nurtured in our lives, what we choose to

ingest while we go about our daily living and what we choose to absorb into the deepest fibres of our beings.

Food changes us. It changes us at a cellular level. The writer of John would not have known the theories behind that as we do today, but by using this metaphor he connects to it instinctively. What we choose to ingest, which type of nurture we put our faith in affects us on a cellular level. It determines who we are, outside and in. What we choose to take in transforms us, positively or negatively.

The question this first "I am" statement confronts us with is this: Is it Jesus and all that he stood for that we make part of our daily diet, or are we feeding on the fast food and easy snacks that the world offers us so freely? Is it Jesus and the love and compassion he lived in our midst that we ingest so it will take effect at the deepest cellular levels of our existence or does it stay an outside thing that never gets past the negativity and bitterness on which it is so much easier to feed ourselves? Is it Jesus and the faithful trust in the power of God's Word and God's providing that we allow to fill our minds and hearts, or do we let the voice of Satan fill our mind and our soul with whisperings of fear, the longing for control, self-sufficiency and greed?

What is it you will have for breakfast this week? Will it be the words of love and forgiveness Jesus lived or will it be anxiety about losing control and the 'never enough' that will feed our greed? Will we have compassion and peace for lunch or will it be the fruits of bitterness and the deep seated negativity of anger that we ingest? And for dinner? Do you have anything in mind that you might want for dinner that will feed you in such a way that you can go to sleep feeling the life as Jesus lived it reverberate in every fibre of your body?

Bread is real. It fulfils a physical, necessary, day to day, need. What Jesus offers, what Jesus is, is good, healthy, wholesome, tasty bread for life. It is a staple that seeks to be ingested in every fibre of our body, filling us with the good and wholesome diet of Kingdom living, growing us into fit and healthy people, spiritually, physically, and mentally as solid parts of God's longing for this world.  
Amen.

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH – SUNDAY 9 AUGUST 2015, Hiroshima Remembrance Day  
Rev Anneke Oppewal  
Exodus 40: 35-38, Psalm 116, John 8:12; 9; Revelation 21: 22-26  
“Light from light”

Do you know that feeling when the neon lights are turned on at the end of a party? They mercilessly show up every puddle and stain on the floor and crack in the wall and you find yourself shocked back to earth, bleary-eyed and not entirely sure where you are, by someone who wants to get on with cleaning the premises and getting it ready for the next morning.

What about the experience of massive fireworks suddenly lighting up the night sky filling you with excited awe and longing for more?

I think that when the writer of John has Jesus identify himself as “the light of the world” in the passages we’ve read from the gospel today, he is trying to provide his audience with both those experiences at the same time.

The experience of light uncovering, mercilessly, the cracks, puddles and stains of the world we are in, and the experience of awe-inspired wonder when we find God’s glorious presence lighting up our existence.

I would like to warn you in advance: When the gospel talks about Jesus being the light of the world in this instance, it is not talking about a little candle in a corner somewhere, or a little light in our hearts. It is about a light brighter than the sun turning on and lighting up the city and even the world with its brilliance. It’s talking about that light that, according to Revelations 21, makes all other light dull in comparison.

Let me talk you through the background:

This part of the gospel of John is pictured against the back drop of the festival of Sukkoth, otherwise known as the festival of booths, or shelter, or the festival of tabernacles. Four names, all the same thing.

This festival was, and still is, the longest, most important and most joyous festival of the Jewish liturgical calendar. (See Exodus 23:16b, 34:22-23; Leviticus 23:33-43; Numbers 29: 12-39; Deuteronomy 16:13-15). It starts 5 days after the feast of Atonement and lasts for 7 full days of joyous celebration.

It commemorates God’s presence with his people in the wilderness. It is remembering God guiding his people in cloud and fire to the promised land, his presence in the tabernacle, his provision of food and water, his care and protection on that 40 year long, dangerous journey through the wilderness. King Solomon chose this festival to consecrate the temple he built, adding to the festival’s importance and reinforcing the connection of the temple to the tabernacle and God’s presence with his people over the ages. After the return from Exile the second temple was also dedicated at this festival. Judas Maccabeus rededicated the temple after the desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes also at this festival.

The festival is becoming more and more deeply tied to the experience of the presence of God with his people on their journey through the centuries over time.

The festival also kept alive the memory of the booths and shelters the people of Israel lived in when they received the covenant and the 10 commandments at Mount Sinai. For the whole seven days of the festival the people of Israel, to the present day, live outside in shelters made

up of palm leaves, vines and other greenery, fruit and vegetables. (This year the festival will start on September 22 and there will be all sorts of celebratory activities in and around Melbourne).

The festival not only looks back, it also looks forward and is connected to the mission of Israel among the nations and the coming of the Messiah. (Zechariah 14: 16-17).

In Jesus' day the temple, sacrifice at the high altar, water drawn from the pool of Shiloam and four giant golden menorahs played an important role in the rituals surrounding the festival.

Water kept the memory alive of the water miracles in the desert, the parting of the sea, the crossing of the river Jordan, and, more importantly, the water gushing from the rock at Meriba (Exodus 17, Numbers 20) that, according to legend, followed them around the desert and provided the people of Israel with water for 40 years (see 1Corinthians 1-5).

Every morning of the festival priests would, after the morning sacrifice of a lamb, process to the main altar in the temple precinct from two directions --from the pool of Shiloam with a pitcher of water they'd drawn from there, and from the opposite direction with a pitcher of wine. They would beat the altar with willow branches to the sound of singing and trumpets playing in remembrance of the miracle at Meriba. Then the water and the wine would be poured over the altar, filling the bowl where the lamb was with a mixture of water and wine (you may want to remember water and blood coming from Jesus' side after he died on the cross, from Jesus as the lamb).

The altar had a deep, mythical significance in the minds of the believers. It was considered to be the keystone holding back the subterranean waters of chaos a kind of lid or stopper keeping the chaos of death in check underneath. People believed that, at the end of time, from this place, a new creation would take shape, that when the Messiah came the new creation would start here, flowing into the world and making everything new.

At night the lighting of the menorahs reminded people of the glory cloud that led Israel through the wilderness by day, and the pillar of fire that lit up their camp by night. The cloud of fire that had rested on the top of Mount Sinai at the time the law was given and descended upon the tabernacle afterwards, filling the Holy of Holy's of the temple after it was built, was a sign of God's enduring, physical, presence with his people. The light of one golden menorah burnt continuously in the temple all through the year, but at the festival of tabernacles four massive, 50 feet high (that is 15.24 metres in metric) menorahs would be lit in the court of women, with fires that burnt, according to Jewish records, as bright as the morning sun and lit up every nook and cranny of Jerusalem. There was a fire ceremony and torch dances where young men would throw torches in the air and catch them.

The festival was a seven day intense, joyful spectacle, full of ritual and charged with deeper meaning and collective memories. It celebrated the presence and providence of God, the giving of the law, and the future gathering of the nations to the light of God's presence in Jerusalem. During this festival, expectations about the coming of the Messiah ran higher than at any other time of the liturgical year.

It is in this context that the writer of John has Jesus drop a bombshell: "I am the light of the world".

You may remember from last week how the "I am" alone is filled with reference to God's presence with his people. Where last week John has Jesus speak about bread, referring to God's providing in the wilderness, he now takes things a step further. He has Jesus no longer refer to something God gives, he has Jesus referring to and appropriating something God is.



God's glory, God's presence, the Shekinah as the rabbis called it, is here, now, present, not only in Jesus, but as Jesus.

It is hardly surprising that the law-abiding Jewish leaders don't like this.

Their stance becomes clear in two stories that bracket the words of Jesus. One is the story of the man born blind, which we read today and the other is the story of the woman caught in adultery. In both stories the religious leaders are shown up as harsh and merciless when it comes to the interpretation and application of the law. This is not in accordance with the joyful celebrations of the festival and the teachings of their own tradition as they are presented at the feast at all. In the way they approach both the woman caught in adultery and the man born blind there is no joy, no generosity, not a hint of the light and liberation that are such an important of the celebrations, to be found. They use the law to trip up Jesus. They negatively apply the rules around the Sabbath to pass judgment on Jesus and use it as an excuse to get rid of one who brings light and life to people.

The Jewish leaders cannot see, even where they are confronted with a light as bright as day and they know it! In the story of the woman caught in adultery they shrink back and disappear when they are invited to throw the first stone. In the story about the man born blind the contradictions in their reasoning and their faulty judgment become more and more apparent, and they more and more aggressive and nasty as a result of it.

As John tells the two stories, it is like the neon lights coming on after the party. In a confrontation dripping with irony the cracks in the reasoning and understanding of the religious leaders becomes painfully obvious. Both stories cast Jesus in the role as revealer and judge on behalf of God, contrasting the glory of God, God's true light, with the dim-witted understanding of those who are stuck in the unenlightened world of darkness. The religious leaders not only reject Jesus, but are shown to contradict their own traditions and rituals. They pit Moses and Jesus against each other, while it is clear for anyone to see that more than Moses is here. In Jesus the history and values they are celebrating at the festival are being recreated, with manna coming down from heaven and the waters parting underfoot. Jesus is the rock of salvation from where living waters flow. Jesus is the lamb that will be sacrificed with blood and water flowing from it. Jesus is the light that has come to guide the people of God through the wilderness, setting the world aflame, so the good and the bad are shown up as never before.

In the story of the man born blind we see the same light that shows up the failure of the religious establishment to grasp what God, what this festival, what the Exodus, the law and the presence of God in tabernacle and temple is really about. For the man it is like the fireworks lighting up the night sky when his eyes open to the truth of who and what Jesus is. For him it shows not only where the cracks and stains of sin are, but also where the bread of life that will sustain him in the desert and the living water from the Rock of Salvation may be found.

We see his faith grow in the confrontation as he engages with the others in the absence of Jesus. John indicates with even more irony, that Jesus doesn't even have to be there for his light to penetrate this man's darkness.

As I was thinking all this through this week a sentence from one of the eye witness accounts of the bombing of Hiroshima struck home for me. "When the bomb detonated it was a light brighter than the sun, and then came the darkness".

Seventy years ago a light brighter than the sun lit up the sky and left 140,000 people dead after a war that took millions of other lives across the globe. Man-made light, forcing a man-made

solution to a man-made mess. It may, or may not have, accelerated the end of the war. It may, or may not have prevented many more deaths and dying. This week, reading from the gospel as we have done, contemplating the passage from Revelations as we have, hearing about the Jesus as the light of the world, in the context of the festival of tabernacles, I think what we need to hear is that the true light of God, where it shines, shows up the cracks and stains of sin in this world, while at the same time bringing healing, insight and true understanding of who God is and what God wants to those who are open to it.

From this light, from this God, does not, does never, come destruction, suffering or pain. Judgment, yes, revelation, yes, showing up of where the shoe pinches, yes, but not, ever, even at its harshest, does this light destroy and kill. On the contrary, if it comes to it, it chooses to be killed, to be destroyed, to be the lamb on the altar that keeps the forces of chaos at bay until such time where the new creation will start to flow into this world. It would rather suffer to show up the forces of death in that way than bite back.

What John tries to tell us through these stories and this announcement he has Jesus make, is that where Jesus enters the world the light comes on. It is a light as brilliant as the light that lit up all of Jerusalem at the festival, a light that celebrates God's presence, God's guidance, God's providing and care, a light that lights up the whole world and gathers the nations to it, as it was promised by the prophets.

Where Jesus enters, water and blood flow, and the sacrificial lamb becomes the centre of celebrations remembering God's goodness and mercy. Where Jesus enters, the altar stone holding back the chaos of death and destruction is pushed away to make way for a new creation with God guiding the way once more in cloud and fire.

In all that richness of text and metaphor we are invited to hear the call and respond to the light with the joy and commitment of those who have seen the light and want to live their life in it. Amen.

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH - SUNDAY 16 AUGUST 2015

Rev Anneke Oppewal

PSALM 95, JOHN 10:1-39

“The Gate Keeper”

This week we come to the third instalment of our series on the ‘I am’ sayings of Jesus as we find them in the gospel of John. We will reflect on two sayings that are intimately related: “I am the Good Shepherd” and “I am the Gate”.

As I have said before: Most scholars agree it is highly unlikely that these words have come from Jesus himself. They are part of a very intricate, well thought through narrative that aims to help its audience to reflect on the nature and person of Jesus in the context of the Jewish scriptures, the Jewish/Hellenistic world of the time and the Early Christian Community. They are focus points tying the richness of text and context together and summing it up in just a few, bold, words.

Last week and the week before we saw how the sayings “I am the bread of life” and “I am the light of the world” were connected to a whole host of Jewish scripture references and Early Christian thinking about Jesus.

We discovered how the writer of John was using the major Jewish Festivals of Pesach and Tabernacles, with all their richness of ritual and wealth of Old Testament references as a backdrop. We also considered how Moses and the Exodus, the pre- and post- exilic prophets, and their dreaming about peace and unity amongst the nations of God’s world was showing through in every direction.

This week we encounter a similar wealth of reference to scripture and context, extended this time to the realm of world politics and international power play.

This week is the Feast of Dedication (John 10: 22), or Hanukah as the main backdrop. It is a feast that takes place shortly after the feast of tabernacles that played such an important role in the background of last week’s saying “I am the light of the world”.

Unlike the feast of Tabernacles and Pesach, Hanukah had been only recently added to the Jewish liturgical calendar of Jesus’ day. Where the feasts of Tabernacles and Pesach dated back to the Exodus and Israel’s time in the wilderness, Hanukah had been around for less than two centuries.

It celebrated the downfall of a wicked King, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and the restoration of the temple after a difficult time of cruel oppression of the Jewish people and all they held sacred.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes (for a picture go to [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e3/Antiokhos\\_IV.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e3/Antiokhos_IV.jpg)) reigned as king over Israel from 175 BC till 164 BC. His story is too long to tell in the context of this sermon, but he was someone whose cruelty was (and still is) legendary in the Jewish collective memory. Not only did he kill many thousands in the most abhorrent ways imaginable, he desecrated the temple and banned all Jewish religious practice in Palestine for a while, on punishment of death. His excuse was his desire to lift the Jewish people out of their backward religious beliefs into the enlightened practice and beliefs of Greek culture and philosophy and bring them up to speed with, to him, the rest of the modern world.

He was a wicked King if there ever was one, who, to add insult to injury, declared himself God, and referred to himself as light of the world. Some sources, to honour him, attribute extraordinary

powers to him such as walking on water and commanding the waves (sound familiar?) In others he is nicknamed “the mad”.

The Jews saw him as a cruel oppressor, the personification of evil, who stole what was sacred to them from the temple and replaced it with the abomination of a statue of Zeus and his own image.

Shortly after he died, in 164 BC, a revolt led by Judas Maccabeus managed to drive his successors out (with the help of some complex international developments elsewhere in the Mediterranean) and restore the freedom to practice their religion to the Jewish people.

It was a victory that was, and still is, celebrated at the feast of Hanukkah, also called the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22).

By mentioning this festival in the text, the writer of John explicitly and purposefully connects Jesus’ statement about him being “The Good Shepherd” and the surrounding narrative context with the collective memories of this king.

Shepherd imagery was widely used in the ancient world, and as we have seen in our children’s story segment today, is in evidence throughout the Jewish scriptures.

It was widely used as a metaphor for what good leadership, for what a good King or Ruler was meant to look like. Kings liked to refer to themselves as Shepherds of their people and liked to be revered by others in that way.

Our wicked King Antiochus Epiphanes was probably one of them. Roman Emperors and other leaders in the ancient world are often portrayed as tending sheep, and being referred to as “Shepherd of their people” or “Protector of their sheep”.

In the Jewish context the metaphor was not only used as a metaphor for human leaders, but also for God and the leadership and care he provided for his people.

The gate is a metaphor closely connected to that of the Shepherd. This gate is not a door, as some translations suggest. It is a living, breathing, protective barrier between sheep and that which could threaten their well-being.

Out in the fields sheep would be led into a pen or sheepfold at dusk. A pen was an enclosure with a low, stone wall around it, with one, narrow opening or “gate”. More often than not multiple shepherds would lead their sheep there to leave them for the night. One shepherd, often the leader would lie down in front of the opening to become a physical, protective barrier for the sheep inside. The other shepherds would come back in the morning, after spending their night around a fire. Upon their return each would call out the names of their sheep, which would recognise the voice of their shepherd and join their own, particular, flock outside the pen.

The shepherd who had slept in the opening would leave last, leading his own sheep to good pastures after he’d made sure all the other sheep were back safely in the hands of their own shepherds.

The Old Testament also refers to God and the law as a fenced enclosure with a gate, the gate that leads into a life surrounded by the walls of the Torah and guided by it.

So, what happens when, with all of that in mind, we look at our reading for today?

All of the above resonates in Jesus' two statements and their surrounding context- the mad king and his cruel reign, the image of what a good leader looks like, Old Testament references to God as the ultimate good shepherd of his people, and the law as the fence around a good life.

At the time the gospel was written people would have been surrounded by shepherds, sheep and sheepfolds, and the imagery would have been vivid, immediate and relevant to their everyday lives.

They knew about shepherds and sheep, they knew what disaster a bad shepherd could bring to the livelihood of those owning the sheep and they knew what terrible dangers shepherds faced at work. They would have heard, safely in their beds in the confines of homes protected by village or city walls, the howling of the mountain lions and wolves and seen the devastation they could cause. Very different from possums!

They also knew, and were reminded by the explicit mention of the Feast of Dedication in vs 22, of Kings that, in contradiction to the words and imagery they liked to use for themselves (I mean the kings), they were not good shepherds of their people, but could kill and maim in a frenzy of blood lust and random cruelty if they choose to do so.

Although sheep and shepherds are no longer part of our own daily experience I think that, perhaps thanks to the bible, the imagery is still a widely understood part of our culture. Even where we don't encounter sheep or shepherds on a daily basis, we know enough about sheep and shepherds to grasp what John is trying to tell us, what the gospel tells us about Jesus and what it means when he has him say that he is THE Good Shepherd, a shepherd that puts his life on the line caring for and protecting his sheep.

Unfortunately each of us does have, in one way or another, experience of bad leadership. We know of rogue shepherds who prey on the vulnerable and abuse their power to satisfy their hunger for power and greed at the detriment of those in their care.

Isis comes to mind as an extreme example of such leadership at the moment, but there are others. Leadership that is in such stark and clear contrast with the imagery of a Good Shepherd that it isn't hard to identify its flaws and see the contrast with the leadership Jesus offers and God calls for in the scriptures.

Mad, bad Kings are still around. Senseless slaughter and random violence and devastation are their hall marks.

The gospel tells us that Jesus offers, and calls for, a very different kind of leadership.

However, there are more insidious and less clear-cut cases of bad leadership that are more difficult to identify. They are less easily contrasted with what the scriptures tell us God in Jesus stands for and calls us to.

The Jewish religious leaders at the time struggled with it. 'How do they know Jesus is the real deal?' we hear them wonder. Is he another imposter, someone who is leading the sheep astray, taking them places where they will come to harm?

This is an understandable sentiment. The story behind the feast of Hanukkah is only one of many celebrating the escape from bad leadership and the victory of God's law and people over deadly and devastating oppression in the Jewish calendar. Jews, probably more than any other people, know about cruel leaders, be it pharaohs, kings or otherwise. They know how corrupt and

corrupting power can wreak havoc and end up slaughtering the innocent at the whim of whoever happens to be in charge. Their history, even at the time of Jesus, was full of it.

Jesus said he is the light of the world. Didn't Antiochus lay the same claim? Jesus says he is the good Shepherd. Aren't there plenty of rulers who do the same?

'Yes,' John has Jesus say.' Sure, I know that history too. Here is what will show you the difference: It is through the fruit you will know the tree. Look, listen, see what happens where people follow me and you will know that I am who I am is manifest in who I am, that I am made of the same stuff as that Shepherd of Shepherds, the Lord God. Trust me, I am true, I am the way to life, I am the source of good, nutritious, God-given food.

The Jewish leadership struggles and I think we should not blame them for that too quickly and easily. It is not always simple to tell the difference between good leadership and bad, between good leadership that will know when to make painful and difficult decisions, and bad leadership that brings unnecessary suffering.

What Antiochus would have said, and others like him, is that you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs. Although not as extreme as he managed to put into practice, this is still the basis of a lot of the leadership we accept and honour in our time, in our political and Church leadership.

Most of us will accept that sometimes the good will have to suffer with the bad in order to get things done. We understand that we cannot always afford to take everyone's well-being into account, that there is no way we can provide good pasture and quiet waters to anybody and everybody and that we need to be practical even if we know we will be causing suffering and harm by doing it.

The imagery John uses tells a different story. By bringing shepherd and gate imagery together, the shepherd John takes the shepherd imagery so popular with Kings and other leaders to another level. The shepherd John refers to is not only a good and just leader of his sheep, taking them places where they will be able to prosper. This shepherd, this king, keeps the sheep safe by laying down his own body as a barrier to protect them from the dangers that threaten them in the night.

Leadership, true shepherding, the gospel tells us, is deeply personal, involved, committed and profoundly physical. It can't be just words, an epitaph, words of reverence and worship that have very little actual root in reality. True shepherding will get the shepherd down in the mud, awake and alert to keep those in his charge from harm.

It reminds me of the times I have stood up on behalf of someone suffering injustice or injury and found myself literally shaking in my boots with rage and pain and of the people who told me afterwards not to take it "so personally".

Leadership, Christian leadership, following in Jesus footsteps is personal. It is something you should feel in your bones. It calls for commitment and dedication to the safety and wellbeing of the sheep.

At the same time, and I'll have to stop there: In Jesus it became clear what can happen when a Good Shepherd is serious about putting his life on the line. He also showed that violence, death and devastation will not have the last word when it comes to it. That should give us hope and strength, to become, wherever we are called to lead or are called to look after others, gates

ourselves that protect God's people and offer them safety, to be shepherds who lead in the image of Jesus and are committed to the well-being of those who are given into our care. Amen.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antiochus\\_IV\\_Epiphanes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antiochus_IV_Epiphanes)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judas\\_Maccabeus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judas_Maccabeus)

This is what the book of Maccabees tells us about Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and how the Jewish people at the time of Jesus would have remembered him:

*Not long after this the king sent an Athenian senator to force the Jews to abandon the customs of their ancestors and live no longer by the laws of God; also to profane the temple in Jerusalem and dedicate it to Olympian Zeus, and that on Mount Gerizim to Zeus the Hospitable, as the inhabitants of the place requested... They also brought into the temple things that were forbidden, so that the altar was covered with abominable offerings prohibited by the laws. A man could not keep the Sabbath or celebrate the traditional feasts, nor even admit that he was a Jew. At the suggestion of the citizens of Ptolemais, a decree was issued ordering the neighboring Greek cities to act in the same way against the Jews: oblige them to partake of the sacrifices, and put to death those who would not consent to adopt the customs of the Greeks. It was obvious, therefore, that disaster impended. Thus, two women who were arrested for having circumcised their children were publicly paraded about the city with their babies hanging at their breasts and then thrown down from the top of the city wall. Others, who had assembled in nearby caves to observe the Sabbath in secret, were betrayed to Philip and all burned to death.*

—2 Maccabees 6:1–11

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH – SUNDAY 30 AUGUST 2015

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Psalm 130, John 11

'Called to rise'

Preparing for the sermon this week a multitude of possible ways into the text presented themselves. After the food, the light, the shepherd and the gate, I discovered that, somehow it is here, in this text, in this story, that the rubber hits the road. Everything that has gone before, and all that is still to come, seems to come together here, layers of reference and metaphor, leaving us with a chaos of possible meaning and purpose that will make anybody's head spin.

On the surface this story seems to be about resurrection, but upon closer inspection it becomes clear that Lazarus, and his miracle resuscitation, paradoxically enough only play a minor role in the end.

Jesus, Martha, Mary, the disciples and others not only get far more air time in the story, it is in their interactions that the possible meanings of this sign become clear. Lazarus doesn't put a word in and after his bindings have been removed, he walks off without so much as a thank you very much, only to come back, a little later, to the threat of murder, which would basically get him back to square one: dead and buried. However miraculous it may be, it seems Lazarus' raising is not going to make much of a difference to him or to anybody else. His life after resuscitation is as fragile as it was before.

His story is a mirror image of Jesus' death and resurrection later on, and that, upon closer inspection, seems to be its main function. It's as if Lazarus is doing a dress rehearsal that will help those who will get to read the Easter story later on to fill in the gaps and notice the differences in the Jesus version of the resurrection.

When Jesus rises, contrary to when Lazarus walks out of the tomb, there isn't an audience to witness the event. When Jesus rises, the grave clothes are left neatly folded in the tomb and won't need anyone to help remove them. Like the empty tomb of Lazarus the empty tomb of Jesus will inspire conflicting emotions and responses, except for the disciples who get it instantly the second time around and not the first. That may be because that first dress rehearsal has prepared them for what is to come. Where Lazarus rises only to face mortality once again, with the Jewish leadership plotting to murder him shortly after he's returned to life, Jesus rises to a life with a different quality, life eternal, life in God's glory that no longer is subject to the devastating power of death. Where Lazarus lives only to die again, Jesus rises to a life that will continue to have an impact on the world, even though he was dead.

What the disciples don't yet grasp when Lazarus walks out of the tomb, they will understand when they arrive at the empty tomb of Jesus later on: That Jesus not only has the power to give life, but that Jesus is life.

The story of Lazarus' raising appears only in the gospel of John and not in the synoptics. This makes it likely that John uses the story very deliberately to help his readers see something they might otherwise miss- something important.

But what is it? Is it to clarify the difference between Jesus' resurrection and Lazarus' return to life? Is it to explain that Jesus' resurrection is more than mere resuscitation, that it has a deeper meaning and further reaching consequences than a mere return to life?

I think there is more.



I think I read more commentaries this week about this text than about all the other 'I am' sayings combined and still I have only an inkling of what lies hidden in the complexity of this part of the gospel. There is so much "more" to this part of the story than the recounting of a miracle, even if the miracle is as spectacular as bringing someone back from the dead.

A couple of things kept coming back to me as I reflected on John 11.

I wondered about resurrection. What is resurrection?

"A dramatic turn-around of circumstances," said someone I asked. Probably we all have experienced such moments of resurrection in our lives.

Something as simple as waking up after a couple of days of cold and flu for instance and realising that you've turned a corner and are suddenly feeling much better can feel like resurrection. Coming home after a spell in hospital and realising that you are really on the mend after a long time of things being not quite right with you or finding your feet again after a difficult period of grieving and significant loss in your life can feel like resurrection. Finding your way back to life through medication or therapy after suffering with depression can have the same effect. Most of us will have had some experience of how that feels at some time in our lives. But is that what John is on about in this chapter?

Yes and no. I think what John is writing about relates to these experiences, but goes further than we can ever experience this side of death. In that sense the story is a hyperbole, an over-the-top exaggeration of a feeling we probably all know and have experienced. We could say that in the story about Lazarus John pulls out all the stops: an actual man, a friend of Jesus, ends up really dead, in a real tomb, with the rotting smell of finality hanging around him and everybody around him convinced that this will be the end of him. John tells us that Lazarus is lost, and that it is final as final as it will be with Jesus.

Both Lazarus and Jesus die a real death and by telling the story twice John hammers this point home. Just in case you won't get it in one go. Jesus is Lazarus. But he is also more than Lazarus and what we get from his story is more than we can ever get from Lazarus'.

Where Lazarus is resurrected to life, Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life even after he has died. Jesus is bread, light, shepherd and gate, not only while he walks the earth, but even more so after the stone has been rolled away. Resurrection with Jesus is not less, but more than resuscitation. Resurrection with Jesus is not about returning to this life, but it is about returning to another life, a life of different quality and colour.

What does that mean for us? I think Kierkegaard said it well: In Christian terminology death is the greatest spiritual wretchedness and the cure is simply to die, to think dauntlessly of everything, including death.

We believe in small resurrections, but faith in the bigger ones often eludes us because we find it hard to die, to let go and surrender where it seems no resurrection is possible. We tend to work. We do either what Martha does, and resign to what we think is inevitable, "Sure God, I get it, we will all rise on the last day" she says, "Sorry for expecting something more in the here and now than that what I got: a dead brother", or we do what Caiaphas and his friends end up doing: afraid of losing control altogether we start making bad decisions and confusing what is of God with what feels like the safest route for us.

The story of Lazarus and the mirroring story of Jesus' resurrection tell us that death has lost its sting. Even if we have to wait a while, even if we don't get it, can't see it, find it difficult to get it,

God is still there in Jesus, is still resurrection and life, even where everything seems to have died.

From personal experience I can tell you that this paradox, that death will bring life, that letting go of what you thought you believed and surrendering whatever it is that you think will keep your world together, will more often than not take you across to a life that is different, deeper connected and more firmly grounded in faith. But, for real transformation to occur, something must happen that is more often than not as difficult as dying, as difficult as feeling the tomb closing in around you and losing touch with what you thought was important in your life.

Fortunately most of us won't have to go through that too often but the scriptures are full of examples of stories, poetry and prophecy urging us not to lose heart when we feel we have ended up in the tomb.

They are full of examples of God calling people out, across the ages, to let go and go down a different path, to another life that ends up having more eternity value than the previous one. Jesus is our ultimate example of that, of transformation and not resuscitation, of resurrection to divine life, and not just a return to the same old story.

If we follow him the promise is that that can happen for us too. We can experience a transformation, new life, a deeper connection, a liberation.

But it costs. Sometimes it costs more than we may feel capable of suffering. If that happens we may know that beside us is the resurrected Jesus, is, the Lord of Life, who's gone through hell before us and will show us the way.

Where he is, is life, is resurrection, is transformation, for you, for me, for our Church and congregation, for our nation, for the world.  
Amen.

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH – SUNDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 2015

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Psalm 31, John 11

‘Waiting and weeping’

Two weeks ago we discovered that, paradoxically, the raising of Lazarus only plays a secondary role in the narrative that surrounds the fifth “I am” saying: “I am the resurrection and the life”. We find the story and the saying at the end of the first part of the gospel of John, the part scholars call “the book of signs” telling us about the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, and at the beginning of the passion story, the journey of Jesus to the cross.

Chapter 11, the chapter we read today, the chapter that surrounds the fifth “I am” saying, and Chapter 12 form a bridge between what has gone before and what will be coming after. Much of what we discovered in the context of the first four “I am” sayings, the ones about the bread, the light, the shepherd and the gate comes together here, and is mixed in with, and connected to, aspects of the passion narrative, forming an intricate and complex tale filled with metaphor, reference and layers of meaning.

We discovered that, instead of Lazarus’ resurrection, it is really Jesus and his resurrection that is at the centre of this part of the story. It is his resurrection, and his way of being after the resurrection. We discovered that what this story calls us to do is to surrender and trust. Trust that God is forever transforming our lives, even where we may find ourselves buried in the darkest of tombs.

There is a lot of waiting going on in this story and that is probably not accidental. Jesus waits, the disciples wait, Martha waits and Mary waits, the people who have gathered to mourn at the tomb wait, and in a sense, Lazarus waits as well.

Their waiting connects, in various ways, to waiting we ourselves may experience as people of faith. There is the waiting for Jesus to lead the way, looking for direction and leadership, for someone who will take charge, for a firm and clear indication of what to do next for the disciples. There is the waiting of Mary and Martha for God to turn up and fix things, hoping he will respond to their prayers. There is their struggle to come to terms with a God that turns up late or not at all - God that doesn’t do what they, with their limited understanding, believe to be the best case scenario.

In all that waiting we are shown different expressions of discipleship.

The disciples, on the road with Jesus, follow faithfully, loyally, trustingly, and prepared to die with their master if need be. That’s no small thing and an important indicator for us of what discipleship might be like: waiting for directions, following where Jesus leads, even if we can see that there may be less desirable consequences for us if we do.

Mary and Martha represent a different expression of discipleship. For them, separated from Jesus, there is the waiting for his coming. Discipleship for them means patient and faithful waiting, suffering, accepting, trusting and surrendering. It means finding the courage to say, when Jesus finally turns up too late: “If only you’d been here!” but even though you weren’t, I’m sure we will all rise on the last day.....

In their interactions with Jesus, Martha and Mary offer us a glimpse of what true discipleship means when God turns up late, or not at all. They offer us a glimpse of what waiting in trust and faith looks like, of what to do when we find ourselves waiting, and not understanding, and hoping against hope, even when we seem to have ended up in a dead end street.

In the meantime, while Martha and Mary and their friends are kept waiting, and Lazarus lies in the tomb, we hear how Jesus with his disciples, follows a long and convoluted route to get to Bethany across the Jordan, into Judean territory near Jerusalem. It is a route that makes very little sense geographically, but is of great theological importance.

Everyone is kept waiting, while the bigger picture of God's journey with his people, as well as the journey Jesus is taking to the cross, is condensed into the smallest of nutshells:

Moving closer to Jerusalem, Jesus ends up in the village where John used to baptise. He crosses the river Jordan at exactly the same place Joshua entered the promised land, before, after and in between spending time in the same wilderness in which the people of Israel spent 40 years on their way to the promised land.

When Joshua enters the promised land from the wilderness of Ephraim after 40 years of waiting, leading the way, is another Lazarus, the then high priest, son of Aaron.

Joshua, successor of Moses, and Jesus, presented by John's gospel as an even greater successor of Moses, are both entering the land where God's promises will be fulfilled from the wilderness of Ephraim. Both have a Lazarus beside them, leading the way through the waters of death.

What we see is Jesus, from a time of waiting in the desert, crossing the river Jordan into what should have been the promised land, but which is, in reality, the land where he will die. By some twist of divine imagination, it will prove to be the promised land after all and then he will return to the wilderness to wait some more.

Right in the middle of all that waiting and journeying, one sentence stops the progression of the story in its tracks. It is the shortest sentence in the bible.

"Jesus wept."

The resurrection and the life, crossing the river of death in every direction, weeps.

The Greek words used around this sentence to describe the emotional state Jesus is in, indicate great disturbance of mind. Passionate and angry, this is not the gentle blinking away of a tear or two, but the gut-wrenching sobbing that will make your body ache.

Suddenly, after crossing the river Jordan into the land of death that will become the promised land, in the midst of all the chaos of sickness and death, of women trying to cope as best they can with their disappointment and pain, of a congregation gathering to mourn their dead, of enemies looking on ready to pounce, of disciples who don't get what he is on about, amidst the faith and hope and trust that still comes through in Martha's words, and amidst the milling crowds and the plotting enemies, when Mary takes him to the place his friend has been put to rest, everything suddenly seems to still, to hold its breath, while Jesus weeps.

Even where Jesus seems confident that Lazarus is only asleep and that it is not unto death but unto the glory of God that he has died, Jesus bawls his eyes out when he gets to the tomb. In the middle of all the movement and the chatter, space is created for a time of mourning, of grieving, of passionate and deeply felt disturbance of mind, body and soul.

What kind of God is that?!

It is a God who can feel the despair and chaos death brings while he knows all that is happening is a waiting for something else, something better.

There is a deep mystery here that is very difficult to grasp or unravel. God cries while God knows. The world is falling apart, while God is holding that world together at the same time. There is death and resurrection, weeping and a calling back to life virtually all at the same time.

I wonder if you have any experience of that, of life being so complex that you can't figure it out, of that feeling of waiting, of trusting, of faith mixed in, stirred through, with the despair of it all, the pain, the agony, the swirling chaos life can be.

Jesus, the gospel tells us, knew, felt, and experienced that confusing and confused set of emotions that comes with deep grief and a faith and hope that somehow won't let go, and made time for it. He gave it space and allowed himself to feel it.

Death and the chaos of suffering and grief around it, this story tells us, is a terrible enemy that will bring even God to tears of anger, frustration and despair. It is not what God wants! But what God knows in the meantime, and what may be difficult for us to see, is that what is yet to come may be worth waiting for.

"I am the resurrection and the life" says Jesus, telling us that where Jesus is, resurrection and life are also totally and completely present, incarnate in our lives. They are there even when we have to wait, even when it feels as if it has taken too long and everything has been lost by now, even when it feels that tears of anger and frustration are the only way left to express faith and trust and hope because where Jesus is, even when death comes and takes everything away, there is still life and resurrection.

There is a deep and difficult call in that for us. To wait and trust, to confront suffering, death and looming disaster with the equanimity of people who know that, in the end, someone beside them is carrying the bread they'll need along the way, is holding the light so they won't fall in the night, is leading, guiding and protecting them, waiting with them for the morning to break, knowing that life on the other side of any death, has the capacity to take us closer to the life eternal to which Jesus Christ showed us the way.

Even if we have to cross the deep waters of despair a couple of times, and hang around in the wilderness for longer than we care for, even if the promised land doesn't look like what we were hoping and aiming for at all, God is there.

What this story tells us is that God is there, waiting in the wilderness with us, crossing the river with us, leading us to the place where transformation will happen, even if it is in a way that is different from that we had hoped for or expected.

This story calls us to wait, to listen, to follow, to trust, even when it may be counterintuitive and scary, and to surrender our lives and the journeys we may be called to take to God. Amen.

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH – SUNDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 2015

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Psalm 139, John 14:1-12

‘The way, the truth and the life’

**By way of introduction at the beginning of the service:**

I know that you know that you are about to know more about John 14 that you haven't known before. There may be some things you know, or you think you know you don't know, or think you know, but you don't know, that you will know at the end of this service. Some of us will know things that others don't know and others know things some us don't know, together we know things that we don't know and don't know things we do know. Collectively there is far more that we know than we do individually. That is why sharing knowledge and talking about what we know is generally a good idea when we want to increase our knowing.

**Sermon:**

I have always found it difficult to focus when reading the 14th chapter of the Gospel of John. A small number of words go round and round in circles in such a way that, instead of helping with understanding the content, they seem to be making it more difficult to follow whatever it is they are trying to say.

This week I've read the chapter, or part of it, to a couple of people, and invariably I've seen them put their head in their hands or showing other outward signs of a struggle to stay focused. I think the text was deliberately constructed that way. John uses an incredibly sophisticated technique designed to bend minds and hammer a message home in the conscious, as well as in the subconscious minds of his readers. It is a technique often used to great effect in clinical hypnosis, as well as in modern advertising and by savvy politicians.

As I learned at the hypnosis course last week in Sydney: Just keep popping the words in that are important, from every direction and in random order until your subject gives up on listening to the structure of your argument and is left with those important words just whizzing around in their subconscious. Those words will then have more impact and on a deeper level. They will take people to a depth of understanding that would not be possible at a purely conscious and rational level.

It is manipulation, pure and simple. It is manipulation that can be used to anchor in your mind things that are important to you or to someone else, at a sub-conscious level. Telling the difference requires skill and conscious effort on our part. We are in charge of what we allow to anchor itself in such a way, but it requires a conscious decision as to whether or not we allow our subconscious to absorb whatever it is that is thrown at us.

Do you know the advertisement for the jeep- That one where someone says “She bought a jeep...”? It is a brilliant example of this technique. It was launched at a time the brand image of the jeep had plummeted and it completely changed peoples' attitudes to jeeps. Before the advertisement appeared, nobody wanted a jeep. And now? They are everywhere! Mission accomplished.

The words John seeks to anchor in our subconscious minds in chapter 14 are Father, I, dwelling, way, truth, life, in, believe, and works. Listen to this:

‘Do you not believe I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe in me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe in me because of the works

themselves'. They underpin the 6th 'I am' saying as it occurs in verse 6 of chapter 14 and help to understand that saying at a deeper level, connecting it to some of the key concepts of the gospel.

Do you remember how we got here?

Two and three weeks ago we talked about resurrection. We read the story of Lazarus that was, and wasn't, about Lazarus, was, and wasn't, about resurrection. Before that we looked at the shepherd and the gate, and before that at the light and the bread. Do you remember? We got deeply into who and what Jesus, according to the gospel of John, is or should be to the believer, and how this is connected to the Jewish festival calendar and the Old Testament stories connected to them, connecting Jesus 'I am' to the 'I am' we encounter in the Old Testament, God the creator, God of the Exodus, God who brought Israel to the promised land through the wilderness, the God of the Psalms and the prophets, of Moses and David and Elijah. We saw how every story, every sentence, every word of those first 5 'I am' sayings of Jesus connected with and referred to the wider context of 'I am' in the scriptures.

In this chapter, that referencing, that connecting dies down a bit. The image of God the Father has extensive roots in the Old Testament. Way, truth and life are also words and concepts that would have been familiar to those who knew the scriptures, but in this chapter there isn't, somehow, the deep multilayered complexity of reference and cross reference we have seen before. The richness of words, imagery and metaphor dies down and makes room for something else.

A limited number of words and images whirl around and around: I am in the Father, as the Father is in me, me in you and you in me, you, me, dwelling in the Father and the Father dwelling in us, Truth, way, life, at work in, by and through you, me, and the Father. The words reappear in a dizzying tumble of confusing discourse, hammering home the message about the essence of who and what Jesus is, the relationship with the Father and how we fit into all of that.

John uses every tool at his disposal to get through to the deeper parts of our emotive brain. There is more to faith than knowing, than understanding something at a rational level, than believing something with your mind and John seems to have realised that. In chapters 14 - 18 he tries to drill down to other levels of knowledge and belief that lie beyond the rational.

I think John is trying to take us, in this text, beyond rational thought, beyond rational understanding into a realm of truth deeper than can be verbalised.

Spending four days in Sydney last weekend learning about hypnosis and how that kind of "mind bending" works, I realised that the confusion and loss of rational focus I have always felt reading those chapters may in fact be a deliberate, brilliant way of John using the most advanced and sophisticated of advertising techniques to get through to the hearts and souls of those reading the gospel to us.

Not only that. In the content of the 6th 'I am' saying I also recognised something else I learned at the hypnotherapy weekend.

To learn something new at an existential level, to learn how to change a habit, or an addiction, to control pain, lose weight, or to let go of behaviour that is no longer serving you and to find new ways of interacting with the world that is more beneficial to you and others, you need to make changes at a core level. The changes need to be connected to your core values, to your core understanding of yourself, your own, deepest, truth, before you are able to make a change successfully. The decision

and the argument that leads to that decision to change, need to be connected to a level in your being that lies deeper than just words.

Only after you've made that connection, after your motivation to change has penetrated below your conscious into your subconscious, will real, true change be possible. Change that will work itself out in you not only doing better, but being better, being a better, more connected, more true to yourself and what you believe in, you.

What Jesus is talking about in John's gospel, what John is talking about in the sixth 'I am' in John's gospel is, I think, about such a deep, existential change- a deep and existential change that is occurring on three levels at once: in and through Jesus, in and through Jesus' followers, in and through the world. With Jesus the change has got underway. In Jesus God creates a place of truth where what lies at the core of God's will for humanity can be connected to what humanity is. In Jesus a way to that deeper truth is revealed, and those who connect to it, dwell in it, will then not only do better, but be better people, people who have been changed at a core, existential, level.

Later on in the gospel Pilate will ask Jesus "What is truth?" Jesus will not respond to that question. We find the answer here. What Pilate asks for, and doesn't get, is a philosophical answer. What Jesus offers is a more fundamental existential response.

Truth, the gospel tells us, *is* Jesus. Truth is to be like Jesus because Jesus is God. In Jesus the reality of the divine has come to life. In Jesus God is. God is Jesus, the divine lives in Jesus, in the divine is Jesus.

The way to that truth, that deep existential at-one-ness? That indwelling with God, that coming home to Divine, is, again Jesus. Jesus is the way. Not merely pointing to it, he identifies as the way, as total, mutual absorption of him and God's way. They are one.

That, by the way, has nothing to do with the one way street of 'we are right and you are wrong' of Christianity being the only way to heaven, or the only way of life, of Christian exclusivism. On the contrary. To be in Jesus means that we are that way, that we live that way, that the truth that way is connected to takes shape in our life, is lived out, translates into a different way of being present in the world. It is not a dogma that can be used to divide, it is a way of being that takes shape in the middle of a world full of other ways. It is not something you can point to, it is something you are on, something you need to be rather than do.

'I am the way, the truth and the life,' the gospel of John has Jesus say, 'And where I am you can be also. I am the Father, the Father is me, in me the Divine is, and I am the Divine' and you can become part of the core truth that holds all of that together. The truth of love incarnate, of life is stronger than death, the truth of life- giving, soul -nurturing being in the world even when that world is wilderness and a place of suffering.

Faith is connecting, at a deep and existential level, to the truth of what lies at the core of the Divine truth engaging with the world, and staying engaged. Faith is becoming part of the way that opens up a space for that truth to flourish, to reveal itself, to take shape and to work itself out in a life that makes the Divine present in the world.

Faith, again, working at three levels:

Connecting to the way, the truth and the life in Jesus, we are to find that way in ourselves, through prayer, in the reading of scripture, through worship and fellowship, becoming more and more one with the way of Jesus so the truth of his life will start to take shape in ours. At the second level we are



to become that way ourselves for the world around us. We are to become God's truth in the world, incarnate Christ, embody the love that he was and still is in our lives and that of others around us so the world will be a better place because of us, because of our dwelling in the Divine truth and the Divine dwelling in us and we together dwelling in Christ.

At the third level we are to die with Christ to make room for the Spirit to do its thing, creating space for more than what we can imagine, for more than we can be, or make happen, to open up a way into God's deepest truth and from there to life with a capital L for what is outside our gambit, our understanding, outside what we can understand. We make room so that the Spirit can create space for love to be at work in ways we can't imagine, ways beyond our understanding, for the world, for the universe, for eternity.

Jesus died, remember? What happened after took his truth way outside the limited imagination of those who had followed him. In the same way we, in Christ, are asked to, when the time comes, let go, and make room for more and better than we can imagine. Amen.

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH – SUNDAY 4 OCTOBER 2015

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Psalm 92, John 14:27-15:17

‘Nurturing connections’

Today we come to the last of our six ‘I am’ sayings. “I am the true vine”, John has Jesus say, and four verses later, for good measure, again: “I am the vine”. As in the reading last week there is an intense repetition of words around these two sayings, hammering their way into our minds. The word ‘fruit’ appears eight times in this chapter, while it only appears twice more in the rest of the gospel. The word ‘abide’ appears nine times, while it only appears once elsewhere and doesn’t appear anywhere in any of the other gospels. In true Johannine fashion we are being told something while we are being told something else at the same time....

We are at the last supper and for the last three chapters, in one, very long, sermon, John has Jesus prepare his disciples for what is to come after the meal is finished- His suffering and death- using the same words over and over again: Love, believe, truth, way, life, work, and now: ‘fruit’ and ‘abide’. In the vineyard of the Lord it is soon to be winter and the vine is pumping one last burst of sustenance into the branches before the pruning season will begin. He encourages the branches to remain faithful, exercise patience, to stay with the deeper truth of God’s loving, to keep going along the way he has shown them, to abide and to trust that the promise of fruit will be fulfilled. Jesus knows what is to come. In this great sermon at the end of the gospel John has him work out the theology of that for himself and for those who are near him. He has Jesus put his journey, and the journey his disciples are about to embark on in the context of a well-known and trusted Old Testament metaphor the metaphor of the people of God as a vineyard, and of God tending that vineyard with the dedicated love and commitment of a wine-grower. Where life is good the vineyard is full of good fruit, the winegrower, the vines, the branches, all working in harmony. Where life is bad there is no fruit, as the vines are no longer connected to the branches and the branches are dead or dying.

When spies are sent out into the promised land just before Israel is ready to enter it after their 40 year journey in the wilderness, two men are needed to carry one bunch of grapes grown on one branch (Numbers 13: 23) as promise of the good life that is awaiting God’s people there, while in the dark times of Ahab the story of Naboth’s vineyard (1Kings 21) tells of what happens when the connection between God and his people is severed. The Song of Solomon and the prophet Isaiah speak about the vineyard as God’s garden of love, while Jeremiah mourns its destruction. Here, leading up to the last Supper, life has been good. Jesus has lived the connection, has been the vineyard, has born much fruit. He has shown what happens when the wine-grower and the vine he is tending are in accord, are of one mind and one purpose, what happens when the connections are right: bread, light, life, truth, way. It has all been happening, but now, after all that abundant fruit bearing and flowering the season is about to change. Everything Jesus is, was and stood for, is about to be cut down and pruned back. Staying within the metaphor Jesus tells his disciples: Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in the winegrower and also believe in me. You will be right, as long as you stay with us, you will be right. After the pruning there will be more fruit, even more abundant than before.

Through Jesus John is addressing his own context- congregations who are facing another winter, are going through another pruning- early Christians facing prosecution and hardship. He says: Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God and also believe in Jesus. Stay connected, although the winter is upon us, as this painful pruning will only help us to bear more fruit later on, as Jesus did. It all may look pretty hopeless and bleak, but it is just a season and in the meantime, God is just getting things ready for the next flowering and fruit-bearing ... It is what happens. Don’t worry. As long as you keep connecting, keep doing the right thing, keep finding ways to grow from the vine where you’ve been grafted, there is always the promise of more and better fruit ahead.

In our lives as people of faith this metaphor is constantly played out. In all of our lives there are good times where there is abundant growth, where everything flourishes and we produce good

fruit by the basketful. Then there are the times when everything slows down to a trickle, where the fruit withers on the branch and nothing seems to be wanting to go anywhere much at all. Then there are the times in between where there is promise and expectancy, ripening, some parts confidently moving forward while others follow more hesitantly. That's life, that's our life.

The same applies to our community, to our Church, our family and our friends. At times all can be going well, with everything blossoming and flourishing all around us and everyone looking forward with excitement and confidence to whatever will come next. Everyone is feeling great with a buzz of activity and achievement going on in every direction. Then there are other times—times of conflict, times of insecurity, times where everything seems to slow down and the future is clothed in question marks and trepidation, times when the grapes turn sour and the sweet juice of God's abiding with us seems a distant memory. That's life, that's our life, and that is the life of our life as a community. It is Christ's life.

It can be pretty unsettling, especially when we hit the season of winter and there seems to be no end to the pruning, the cutting back of what we know and love, when the grapes turn sour on the branches and the vine doesn't seem to be doing much in the way of nourishing and when the vine-grower seems to have gone away on holiday and we are not sure if the dead looking wood will ever bear tender green shoots again. "Abide in me as I abide in you" says Jesus. If you do, the sap of the vine of love will keep trickling through you and bear fruit in one way or another again. If you don't, if you get disconnected, you'll end up dead wood, not bearing fruit. On the cross Jesus is fed sour wine. In the context of the metaphor of the vineyard this is the lowest point in the story. Thirsting for justice, feeling abandoned by God, there is little left of the thriving vineyard of God's goodness other than vinegar. Sour grapes. The tree of life, the true vine is withering in the depth of winter, every promise of fruit gone. When Jesus dies he says, and this is only in the gospel of John, "It is accomplished", "It is finished". He lets go. He lets go of his life, let's go of the promise, let's go of the future, let's go of the vineyard that has been blossoming so promisingly while he was around. When he dies he gives over to God, looking to stay connected even then, but handing over, cutting back to a point where there seems to be nothing left to bear fruit. We all know of course what happens next. We celebrate it every month in communion, that in letting go, in giving himself, through his surrender in obedience, something new starts. A new community grows up, a new fruit bearing begins, the vineyard starts to blossom once more again and again and again.

So why are we so worried about the future of the Church, in our own personal life? Why are we so worried when the winter comes, in the life of our community as well as in our personal life? Why do we always, always, end up hanging on with all our might to what we know, to the past, to the growing and fruit bearing of the past? Why do we seem to find it exceedingly difficult to do what Jesus did: Let go, share what we are, what we have, what we have received, die in the process if need be, in trust that our sharing, our giving, our loving, our connecting to the truth, our staying on the way, our abiding with the vine and the winegrower, will continue to flourish, will even flourish more after the pruning is done, after the dead wood has been removed and has made room for the new growth to get exactly the right amount of nurture, sun and shade it needs to flourish and bear fruit?

Why do we struggle and resist change so much while our experience and the metaphor of the vineyard tells us that change is inevitable, is necessary and is how vineyards grow, through the seasons working in harmony with the wine-grower to bear more fruit, produce more love, more life true to God's purpose, more sweet and bubbly wine of the Kingdom. Amen.

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH - SUNDAY 18 OCTOBER 2015

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Psalm 42, John 18: 1-8, 19: 1-3, 19-20, 23-30

“Woven in one piece, from the top”.

Why, you might wonder, are we reading a big chunk of the passion story from the gospel of John this morning? It is nowhere near Good Friday, or Easter and isn't that the time of year where we would usually be reflecting on this part of the scriptures?

You are right. It is a bit odd to read the story of Jesus' crucifixion in the middle of October and no, it is not on the lectionary for this Sunday. Still.... I think reading this part so completely out of the expected liturgical context might actually help us understand things about that story we would otherwise miss -hence the reading.

Over the last couple of months we have been reading from the gospel of John, with our reflections focused on the “I am” sayings of Jesus and their context.

Just as a reminder:

Jesus says:

I am the bread of life,

I am the light of the world,

I am the gate,

I am the good shepherd,

I am the resurrection and the life,

I am the way, the truth and the life,

I am the true vine.

These sayings are unique to the gospel of John and do not occur in the other gospels. It is highly likely that they were put on Jesus' lips by the writer of the gospel in an attempt to summarise what he felt were core concepts for those who would be reading his gospel to understand who and what Jesus was. Although they were probably never spoken by Jesus himself, we can assume that they reflect his core teaching, or at least the core teaching as the writer of the gospel would have understood it.

We discovered that all of those sayings are deeply and extensively connected to concepts and traditions in both the Old and New Testaments, and that each offers a multilayered, and very rich background and commentary to aspects of Jesus' ministry.

We discovered how the stories of the exodus from Egypt and the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness to the promised land, as they had been handed down in the scriptures and were celebrated at Jewish festivals, are deeply connected to the sayings about the bread and the light.

We discovered how, in the sayings around the gate and the good shepherd, ideas about the ideal king as they occur in the Old Testament, especially in the prophets, are reflected.

We saw how the sayings about Jesus being the resurrection, life, way and truth again are embedded in Old Testament beliefs about the truth of how God is at work in the world and what constitutes a good way of living for us.

We saw the saying about Jesus being the true vine again deeply connected to Old Testament prophecy and understanding about God's relationship to God's people and the way they are in the world.

We saw how the gospel of John presents Jesus as someone who is, at every level, in what he is and what he does, deeply connected to the God we encounter in the Old Testament and deeply embedded in the ongoing story it tells about God's journeying with his people.

By the time we get to the last saying, “I am the vine”, this connection has been shown to be so deep that it becomes impossible to tell the difference between one and the other, between Jesus and God as revealed in the scriptures before him, with Jesus and God becoming mutually exchangeable in the thoughts of the gospel writer. God is abiding in Jesus as Jesus is abiding in God, the son one with the Father and the Father one with the son, inviting us, as disciples, into that unity and to become part of it.

That is where we got to last time and according to most scholars, that is where the series of “I am” sayings finishes. It ends telling us, telling those who read the gospel that God is in Jesus and Jesus in God. We are in them as a gardener, a vine and its branches are mutually dependent, feeding one another, relying on one another for our growth, our nurturing and our fruitfulness. It is a beautiful, intimate and rich image of what faith, at its best, is like. It is like a vine carefully nurtured and cared for by the wine-grower, with branches grafted on its stem producing great wine for the world and the gardener to enjoy.

Most scholars are happy to leave it at that, assuming that John says all he has to say in those seven sayings. Seven is the number of completion in the scriptures and with all the symbolism going on in John, it would fit the picture really well to assume that this is where John’s statements about the nature and person of Jesus are completed. Jesus is the vine, bearing fruit through the branches after the pruning is done.

However, I think there is one more, which would take us to eight. Eight is another symbolic number of great significance- the number of the new day, of the next thing happening, of resurrection, of the Church being born.

It felt as if there was something missing, as if something else needed to be said before the picture we have of Jesus could really be complete.

Guess what?

There is one more “I am” in the gospel and it is even repeated three times to make sure we don’t miss it.

In Gethsemane, in the garden where the betrayer Judas comes to arrest Jesus, Jesus answers, three times when asked: “I am He”.

The reason most scholars will not count those three times when looking at the “I am” sayings, is obvious. Nothing much glorious happens to Jesus around those sayings. On the contrary, he finds himself betrayed, arrested, abandoned, alone and in the dark. After the rich and deep connecting to the scriptures and the glorious past of God’s journey with his people of the other sayings, this set seems to hang in mid- air with very little theological fireworks around them for support. By putting his own life on the line he gets his disciples a ‘free get out of jail’ card, but that’s about as heroic as it gets. And yet!

John reports that upon hearing these words, everyone around Jesus in that dark garden falls to the ground, an expression of fear and awe we find time and again in the Old Testament where people encounter God. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses fall to the ground, Samuel, David, Elijah, and others, fall to the ground when they realise they have entered the presence of God. Here, in the garden, at this dark hour, we find Jesus, recognised as God even while he is arrested. Here at this dark hour Jesus and God merge into one even more so and more deeply than before. Even if they don’t even know why, those around him acknowledge that, want it or not.

A deep paradox will continue throughout the passion narrative, connecting what we have learned about Jesus in the gospel to what happens to him before he dies and showing that somehow they are one, that they speak one and the same truth, however paradoxical it may seem.

Before Pilate Jesus is dressed up as a king, wearing a purple robe and a crown of thorns. There again is the paradox: in the depth of his suffering this king shows who he truly is- a king who is

prepared to lay down his life for his people if it comes to it, who gets them free passage out of trouble, whose care and love reaches even beyond his own death.

As Pilate writes the inscription that is to go on the cross in Hebrew, Latin and Greek, again the truth about this man is communicated on a level that goes way beyond what Pilate could ever have had in mind. In the language of religion, of empire and of culture the message goes out: This is the King the Jews have been hoping for and expecting, the King that brings a message of salvation to the whole world and on every level.

Soldiers dividing Jesus' garments find a priestly robe, woven in one piece from the top amongst his possessions. This is too precious to cut up as it signals that there is not only a king being lifted up on this cross, but a priest, a man of one piece woven from the top, who, before he gives his last, gives people to each other, asking them to love and care for one another when he is gone.

Even on the cross we find the shepherd at work, pastoring to his flock. Even while laying down his life here and in the garden, he is safeguarding the well-being of his disciples. The vine, lifted high, is the tree of life, giving to the last.

He is portrayed drinking, deeply, from the cup of suffering, the sour wine, turned into vinegar, lifted up to him on a hyssop branch. Even as he finishes we may discover that in the gospel of John, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost all happen on the same day, at the same moment, the moment where Jesus gives up the Spirit and in his suffering gives up the spirit to those who stand around the foot of the cross, new life flowing into the future from the place of pain and surrender to the forces of death.

At the cross, in typical Johannine fashion, there is not one thing happening, there are at least three things going on at the same time.

At surface level the man who travelled the length and the breadth of the country giving shape to a life as God would want it, comes to a brutal and unjustifiable end through the hands of those who are scared and intimidated by his radical gospel living. The unjust suffering of the righteous as we encounter it in the scriptures time and time again reaches its pinnacle here where an innocent, good man suffers alongside others for no reason other than betrayal, envy, and bloody-mindedness.

Underneath that is the story of God with his people. The journey of "I am" from the time of Abraham all the way through to the crucifixion and beyond, present and identifying with his people in times of darkness and death, pulling them through, feeding them, being their bread and their light in the wilderness, offering them truth and life where they need it, holding on and nurturing them as a vine its branches through the thick and thin of life.

Underneath that is the story of the people of God, of the Church, identifying with Jesus and identified as Jesus, who look up to find their God sharing their journey, in its highs as well as in its lowest lows. He is with them, taking their suffering upon himself, stepping into their place where he can, calling them to community, nurturing them with strength and inspiration where life gets difficult, weaving them as a cloth in one piece, from the top, to serve the world as a priestly nation in Jesus' name.

On the cross we find the most profound of the "I am" sayings happening. God, from above, identifying and identified as one with the man on the cross, suffering for and with his people, showing where his commitment lies, even when the day becomes darker than the night.

This indicates that faith, that God with us, that God in us, is not about entering a sweet pious bubble of comfort and ease and staying there, but is about being firmly rooted in a world where bread, light, and life are not always to be found easily. Here at the cross we find God weaving a garment from the top, seamless and precious, bringing together the paradoxes of life, the strands of history, the promise of the future, the seeds of

community, the journey of a man who has shown that there is a way of life that is true, that a cross can be changed into a tree of life when we stay connected to each other and to the wine-grower and his vine.

Even in the deepest darkness this God is present, inside the moment, inside our moment, sharing life with us, sharing our pain and suffering, pulling us through and showing us the way to new life, different ways of living, more consistent paths towards wholeness, healing and peace. Amen.

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