

Enneagram. 25th April, 2021.

There are some statements that we make in life that are difficult, if not impossible to retract - even if we wish at times that we had never made them. They are defining statements that indicate to others a solid position that we are taking and that we will not back down upon. My favourite, as you probably already know, is Martin Luther's statement before the Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms, where he was asked to recant his writings. Having asked for 24 hours to think things over, he was again called before the Emperor and said, "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures and by clear reason (for I do not trust in the pope or

councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen."

Following this there was a huge uproar, some cheering and some jeering and others yelling, 'To the fire with him!'

Only those closest to him heard his following statement; 'Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.'

But it is not April 18th, 1521, and we are not in Germany before the Emperor Charles V, but I dare say you felt on just such a spot when you were at your wedding and asked whether you would take this woman or this man to be your wedded wife or husband. Long - and we hope not pregnant - pause... "I will," is the correct response, although most common songs and stories still suggest the words are, 'I do.'

Nevertheless, a defining moment in your life - or at least it should have been. I like that Luther invoked God's help to make his stand, as did Sheila and I in our wedding when we said, 'With God's help, I will.' Heaven knows we've needed His help on several occasions!

But non-retractable statements are not only those that land you in the so-called 'tender trap' of marriage, but also when we swear oaths on the bible in court, or make a statement of allegiance to a cause or nation or flag. When I became a Canadian citizen I had to swear an oath of allegiance in both English and French.

Going against these defining statements almost always will get the person in trouble; perjury and treason are not well looked upon, but sometimes it is the statements themselves that land people in deep water. And that is what I want to explore today in that we have, in our gospel reading, one of the so-called, "I

am," statements of Jesus. Classically, there are supposed to be 7 of them - all found in John's Gospel - and we'll take a look at them.

However, I don't hold with the theory that says there are 7 'I am ' statements; I believe there are nine. We'll get around to that too.

In order to start understanding John's references, we need to begin with realizing that all of them are echoes of the statement in Exodus 3; 13,14, where Moses asks God, 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" Then what shall I tell them? God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are

to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

OK - this doesn't mean a whole lot to many people just put like that until we begin to look at the implications of what is being said.

Even in the philosophy of Descartes, 'Je pense, donc je suis,' or, 'I think, therefore I am,' requires an existence.

Behaviourologists, such as Stephen Ledoux, James O'Heare and Lawrence Fraley would argue that there is no such thing as 'I', and no such entity as a 'mind', so no possibility for choice exists. You might be reassured to know that I don't hold with those views, but they would suggest that as there is no 'I', one can

only say that thinking was occurring, not that 'I am thinking.'

We could very bogged down in philosophy and philosophers here, but that would be to drop down an almost bottomless rabbit hole - an 'oubliette', you might say - so I will resist that temptation for now.

My excursion is to take you beyond what Jesus actually said to what might be implied by his words.

The first 'IAM' is 'I am the Bread of Life'; in other words, a source of energy. Just hold that thought for now.

The second is, 'I am the Light of the World'; another source of energy.

The third is, 'I am the gate;' the fourth is, 'I am the Good Shepherd,' (as we heard in today's gospel); the fifth is, 'I am the Resurrection and the Life;' the sixth, 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life;' and the seventh, 'I am the True Vine.'

So we have sources of energy, protection and a clear way, eternal life (more energy), further clear direction and more energy, and finally, the basis for all of them - the True Vine.

None of these is really a very concrete image except for a gate and a vine; the rest are somewhat vague and puzzling - made even more

so when Jesus tells people that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood.

All of these 'I am' references are only found in John's Gospel, and each of them is understandable through the reading of the first chapter of this gospel, which we read every Christmas time;

'In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God...The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us...'

And this is an echo of the beginning of Genesis; 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.'

We are called to recognize that God is Spirit; 'God is Spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth,' Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well.

'I tell you that truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit,' he says to Nicodemus.

We are given the sacrament of Baptism because it is an 'outward and physical sign of an inward and spiritual meaning'. That is what a sacrament is. Therefore we are called to understand what is essentially inexplicable - to be born of the Spirit.

In my view that means to begin to understand God as Spirit - not some old buffer with a long, grey beard floating on a cloud, yelling at St Peter that there's someone knocking at the gates. It means that we are forever and always in the presence of God; as Psalm 139 says, 'Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?'

When we stop running away from God we will begin to realize that God is there to protect, envelope, carry, love and guide us; 'if I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

Of course! Because God is Loving Energy - with a capital 'L' and capital 'E'.

And energy can neither be created nor destroyed. The word, YHWH is thought to mean 'he is', or 'being', as in the Mosaic rendering of 'I am that I am' in Exodus.

But we need to see Jesus in these statements as depicting the divine in all of us. We are made - we are told - in God's image; and given the diversity of human forms on this planet, there is little mileage in arguing about whether God was black, white, yellow, red, purple with green spots, male, female, hermaphrodite - or transgender; we are all made of energy. Life is energy, and since energy cannot be

destroyed, then what we will be after we die in physical terms, will be another form of energy. That's why I have some sympathy with the Buddhist tenet of reincarnation. Who knows - they might be right?

More importantly, our 'I am' statements show us that nothing Jesus was as a man could be destroyed, and that he encapsulated all divine power and knowledge even in his earthly ministry, although at times it was hidden.

Consider his eighth 'I am' statement that I would add to the other seven; 'Before Abraham was, I am.'

How can a mortal man make such an absurd statement? Hardly surprising then that the people tried to stone him.

The final 'I am,' comes in the Garden of Gethsemane, where the contingent who come to arrest Jesus and want to see him dead approach him; 'Who is it you want?' He asks. 'Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied.

"I am he," Jesus says, and they all draw back and fall to the ground.

That 'I AM', is just too powerful to withstand, and Jesus having just been at his lowest ebb as a human being, asking that he might not go through with this ordeal, draws himself up and

with the power of the divine Spirit of God literally floors his opposition with a word.

No wonder they were keen to kill him, this kind of power was making them look weak and silly.

But we - when we are asked, 'Who is it you seek?' And respond, 'Jesus of Nazareth', if we listen, he will speak the words to us too - 'I am he.'

So let us not fall back in fear, but run to him and hold him fast, for he is all those seven 'I am's' and more; bread, light, gate, shepherd, resurrection, way, truth, life, and true vine. He is also eternal energy, which is the holy Spirit of God - and also why God is in every one of us too.

Treasure that - it will last way beyond your lifetime.