

**SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY 29/4/2023" EASTER 4: GEOFF CHADWICK
JN 10:1-10 "I AM THE GATE KEEPER"**

One of the ways to understand the Gospel of John is to see it as an answer to the question "Who is Jesus". Written much later than the other Gospels, it seems to be a manual on Jesus' Character. The church is now becoming established and those on the fringes of church life may have been asking the Christians "Who is this Jesus you talk about?" This is a little different from asking "What did he do?"

The 'I am' statements in John are an example of this. Throughout his Gospel John has Jesus say several times: *I am*. There are seven: *I am*:

- *the bread of life (6:35),*
- *the light of the world (8:12),*
- *the gate for the sheep (10:7),*
- *the good shepherd (10:11, 14),*
- *the resurrection and the life (11:25),*
- *the way the truth and the life (14:6)*
- *the true vine (15:1)*

The number seven would not be lost on those who understood seven to be the "holy number of the scriptures". Furthermore, "*I am*" is a translation of the Greek "*ego eimi*" which points to the episode in Exodus where Moses, seeing the burning bush, asks for God's name:

13 But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' 14 God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you."' (Ex 3.13-14, NRSV)*

"*I am*", "*I am who I am*", and "*I will be who I will be*" are possible translations of the four letter word Y.H.W.H. which occurs in this passage. Technically, the exact meaning of the word is unknown, and because of its supreme holiness, Jewish people were forbidden from saying

it. Instead, they would say the word (*Adonai*) LORD, which our English bible conveniently transliterates as the capital letters L.O.R.D. So if you see *LORD* in Capital letters in your bible, the Hebrew word is the unutterable Y.H.W.H.

If you see the word “Lord” not in capitals, then Hebrew uses some-other permitted spoken word for God. (Such as *Adonai*).

So an audience with some Hebrew/Jewish background, would have understood immediately that Jesus’ use of the term “*I am*” is a reference to divinity.

In John’s gospel you can interpret it this way:

Jesus says “*I am*”:

- *God, the bread of life (6:35),*
- *God, the light of the world (8:12),*
- *God, the gate for the sheep (10:7),*
- *God, the good shepherd (10:11, 14),*
- *God, the resurrection and the life (11:25),*
- *God, the way the truth and the life (14:6)*
- *God, the true vine (15:1)*

Jesus, through John’s narrative, is essentially saying that he is God, and this is what God is like.

Not everyone liked this at the time, and it’s a build up to the charge of blasphemy later in this chapter and ultimately at his trial.

*33The Jews answered, ‘It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.’
(Jn 10:33,NRSV)*

So in a way, the seven “*I am*” sayings form a sort of early church Creed. For those who wanted to know what the Christians thought of Jesus and God, they would hear this:

*God is, life giving bread, light, the gate, good shepherd, resurrection, life, truth, and true vine.
And we have found these things in the person of Jesus.*

It is as simple as it is complex! John has a habit of doing that. He portrays the most remarkable mysteries of God in the simplest of ideas! And that's true for today's reading.

What did it mean for Jesus to say:

'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

Well, it helps to look at some of the shepherding practices in Jesus' time.

In his day, at evening, a shepherd would herd his sheep into an enclosure often made of tree branches piled up into a makeshift fence. Sometimes there would be ready-made stone fences, but rarely did the enclosure have gates. At night, the shepherd himself would sleep at the entrance to act as a "living gate". In this way he guarded the sheep from would-be predators and sheep stealers. The shepherd, as gate, was protector and gate keeper. The shepherd gave permission for both entry and departure from the fold.

(I once had a retired Irish parishioner who had told his family back in Ireland that his first job in Australia was as a gate keeper on the Rabbit Proof Fence. Apparently, it was his job to decide which rabbit had permission to cross over or not. He told me his relatives believed him!)

Jesus also makes mention of thieves and bandits. He says:

...anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. (Jn 10:1, NRSV)

This can be interpreted various ways.

- It could refer to those who attempt to “sheep-steal” church members from another congregation by crafty means.
- It could refer to the corrupt leaders, who in biblical history, had run the holy-land through corrupt and violent means.
- It could refer to false teachers, trying to bypass the person of Jesus.
- It could refer to corrupt Pharisees and Sadducees who had not acted as the “true” shepherds of those faithfully entrusted to them.
- It could also refer to the “false messiahs” who had attempted popularity in times contemporary with Jesus.

Of course, all of these interpretations may be valid but I think the point is:

That if Jesus is not at the gate, then corruption and violence are possible.

I wonder how this sits with you?

- Is it possible for churches to forget their gate keeper?
- Is it possible for church members to become gatekeepers of their community - opening the gate to the people they like, and closing it to the ones they find difficult?

(I’ve had it happen to me: where a church leader made me unwelcome because I hadn’t trained at the “correct” University.)

I wonder, if in John’s day, something like this was going on: some sort of conscious or unconscious discrimination amongst church members? If so, John, referring to Jesus as “*I am the gate*” is a condemnation and a reminder.

“Remember this” he is saying “Jesus is the arbiter of who belongs to our fold. More than that, he is their protector.”

There’s also a warning about corrupt leadership:

“Those who try to take control of the flock by force are thieves and bandits. So make sure you are very aware of your leadership aspirations. Not only that, our true shepherd; our true leader is one who is courageous enough to be the gate. He watches in the darkness and keeps us from the harm we can do to one another.”

This is true leadership, and it does not come easily!

I ask myself the question, and maybe you can ask it as well:

“Am I as a church leader willing to be at the breach to defend the members”. Am I willing, “to be like Jesus” in this regard?”

I like to think I could say yes, but when under a real threat I wonder if my practice would match my theory!

But actually, that’s the point. Ultimately, I am not the gatekeeper. None of us are. Jesus is!

That’s good news indeed, because where we may fail “*I am*” will prevail!

It’s good to know that in the midst of life’s many dramas and challenges, there is a higher power watching the gate for us. Thieves and bandits may come and go, but Jesus will never leave us.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.