

Trinity 9B August 1st 2021

It appears that somebody got into the front window of life and changed the price tags. The expensive things now have cheap labels. The cheap things have expensive labels. What has happened is that today we have what might be called a transvaluation of values. Everything is turned upside down. Important values have become unimportant for many people. Unimportant values have been turned into seemingly valuable categories.

Just look at the ads on television, the internet, the movies, or the magazines being produced today. From the perspective of popular media you would think that getting more and more material things is the most important thing of all and that God, his Church and the Bible are somewhere on the sideline, if we are to consider them at all. Values have been turned upside down. It has happened gradually, so many of us have hardly noticed that it has happened. It is like the old story of the frog in the kettle. Put a frog in hot water and he will jump right out, but put him in cool water and gradually turn up the flame underneath the pan and the frog will slowly die without noticing what is happening. Aleksander Solzhenitsyn put it this way: “We always pay dearly for chasing after what is cheap.”

Our cultural path to death is like that. The corrective for this situation of upside-down values is found in the name of God — the great I AM. This is the name that God revealed to Moses when Moses agreed to go to Egypt and lead the people out of bondage. “Give me your name that I might tell the people who sent me,” Moses requested. “Tell them that I AM who I AM sent you,” God replied (see Exodus 3:13-15).

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus used the name I AM for himself on numerous occasions. In the text before us, he says of himself, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35; also see 6:48 and 6:51). In John 8:12, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” In John 10:7 Jesus says of himself, “I am the door of the sheep” and in John 10:11 he claims, “I am the good shepherd.”

Other “I am” sayings by Jesus in the gospel of John include: “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 real vine” (John 15:1). “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). Time doesn’t allow us to examine each of these “I am” sayings in depth, but it is obvious that in the Gospel of John, Jesus identifies himself as the great I AM that Moses met in the wilderness.

Jesus was a great teacher, but those who claim that he was just a great teacher, and not divine, have to eliminate these I am sayings, the rest of John’s Gospel and most of the New Testament from consideration. I AM is God’s name. Jesus claims that name for himself. Either he is egocentric and insane, a liar, or he is what he claims to be: both God and man.

Exodus 3:13-15 puts these words into the mouth of God: “This (I AM) is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations.” That is the high, holy, and exalted name God uses for himself. Jesus used that name for himself. Should he be locked up, sidelined, or held up high and worshipped?

In our Gospel for today, we hear the claim of divinity and the connection between the wilderness story of Moses and the preaching of Jesus on the theme of bread. Moses received the manna from heaven. Jesus claimed to be the manna from heaven. Moses told the people that they needed to eat the heavenly manna God sent to sustain them. Jesus said he is the heavenly manna that sustains us. Moses pointed away from himself. Jesus pointed to himself the great I AM who is the bread of life.

Since Jesus is the great I AM, that means he is in control. I am not in control, but my sinful tendency is to try to be in control. As a servant says in the parable of the master who went away to be crowned king, “We don’t want this man to rule over us” (Luke 19:14). We don’t want anyone to rule over us, not even God who created us. That’s the biggest conflict that characterises our days.

The entire Bible can be outlined around this theme of God’s rule over us. In Genesis 1, God creates us in his own image. He commands that the fruit of one tree is out of bounds. Chapter 2 of Genesis tells us that we rebel against God’s authority and eat that one forbidden fruit. Then we play the game — passing the buck- its un-Australian not to blame someone. Adam replies to God who asks him what happened, “It’s her fault. She made me do it.” Eve responds, “The snake is responsible.” If the snake was Australian and could speak, I suppose it would say, “Don’t blame me. You made me that way.” In other words, not only do we rebel against God’s authority, but we make excuses instead of repenting for our wrong doing. Sound familiar? The rebellion and rationalisation mean that we don’t want God to rule over us. The rest of the Bible from Genesis 2 through the last verse in Revelation is about God working to restore us to God’s reign over us. God works to restore us in God’s way, not by forcing us under his control with power, but by inviting us back to his control for our own good. That invitation comes to us because God gave us the option of saying “Yes” or “No” to him. We have the freedom to reject God’s offer of accepting us in Christ, in spite of our rebellion- if we repent and come to him sincerely. Before we come to him, he has come to us by the power of the Holy Spirit to create the faith we need to be saved. As Martin Luther said, “I cannot of my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him, but the Holy Spirit called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith...”⁽¹⁾ While we are fighting the rule of God over us for our own good, God is at work in us to bring us back into the fold. That’s the classic battle in our souls between God and the devil.

God has accomplished our salvation by Jesus dying on the cross. Inspired and prodded by the Holy Spirit, we are called to appropriate what God in Christ has accomplished. From the cross Jesus said, “It is accomplished.” It’s like a gift of a million dollar cheque being given to us by God’s grace. It has been given, but unless we turn it over and sign it and that’s all we have to do. Have you signed the back of the cheque?

Instead, of course is the temptation to put other things in first place and thereby commit idolatry. As mentioned earlier, many people have turned the biblical values on their head. They value things that are cheap and devalue things like faith that are precious. That’s happening in our culture at an ever increasing rate. The good news is - we have been here before- this is not the first time in the history of the West where Christianity and the Church has gone into decline at the expense of forces dividing and/or opposed. When we think of the various waves of persecution of the Christian church during the Roman Empire over four centuries and the malaise of the Church of England in the 17th Century to name just a few. However at those very points of decline in the jaws of defeat the Church have then gone on to create the great forces of renewal and revival.

In addition, in many churches, we have so emphasised the horizontal dimension of Christianity that we have neglected the vertical dimension. The horizontal dimension is the human relationships we have, the need to respect one another, serve one another, and love one another. In many churches, the social gospel has replaced the gospel of salvation through Christ. In other words, the emphasis on the horizontal dimension of our faith is true enough, but not big enough. The whole truth is contained in the biblical admonition, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

The whole truth, the big enough truth, is that we are called to love the Lord our God above and beyond anything else. That is the vertical dimension so often neglected today. Our Gospel provides a corrective by reminding us that Jesus is the great I AM and the bread of life. The great I AM is in charge. That we are called to love our neighbours is a corollary to loving God first. From the perspective of the gospel of John, there are two options in life: either I'm in charge, or I AM is in charge. When I'm in charge, life doesn't work the way it was designed. When I AM is in charge, life works the way it is supposed to work according to God's plans and purpose.

When I'm in charge, I consistently stuff things up, make excuses for the mess I make, and refuse to take responsibility for what goes wrong. In other words, the biggest problem I have in life is that I am self centred. The centre of the word "sin" is I. That's the problem we all have. We can't get ourselves out of the centre, even when we try hard. No act of the self can lift the self out of the self because the self is the problem. I repeat: No act of the self can lift the self out of the self because the self is the problem. Unless that which is above us rules that which is within us, that which is around us will. In other words, we get trapped in one idolatry after another when we don't submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ, the great I AM.

The great I AM has spoken. What he says is called the word of God. That word of God is primarily Jesus himself. In addition, that word is the Bible and the preaching and sharing of the gospel.

Will we listen to the siren calls of the world or will we listen to the word of God and pass it on? The answer to that question is given in a story about a bully and a wise man. The bully decided to challenge the wise man. "I have a little chick in my hands, behind my back. If you are so wise, tell me, is it alive or dead?" Of course, the wise man knew that if he said, "Alive," the bully would kill the little chick. If he said "Dead," the bully would pull out the chicken from behind him and say, "Wrong." The wise man said, "That's up to you."

In like manner, the answer to whether you will follow the ways of the world or the ways of the great I AM is the answer given by the wise man. "That's up to you."

Fr Robert Newton

1) Martin Luther, The Small Catechism, The Book of Concord (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), p. 161.