

**A MESSAGE PREPARED AND DELIVERED BY THE REVEREND ROSEMARY WRIGHT IN ST HILDA'S
14 AND 18 MAY 2017**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord. Our Strength and Our Redeemer.

A few weeks ago Judy was preaching to us, and spoke about some of the differences between the first three Gospels, the Synoptic Gospels, those seen with the eye, and the fourth Gospel, that which is attributed to John, and written much later.

This morning I am going to pick up on one of those differences, which occurs only in John's Gospel, some of which have come up in our Gospel readings over recent weeks. It is a group of seven signs which relate exclusively to the personhood of Christ, and which together form a spiritual bridge between both Jesus and his Father, and Jesus and his followers, and maybe we can see something of how they can help us to relate to God through Jesus.

The first of these signs is 'I am the bread of Life.' (6:35). It comes shortly after the parable of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, a miracle where bread plays an important part. And continues a few verses later, by relating a human understanding of the role of bread in life, to a spiritual understanding of the role of bread in eternal life. At this point, the breaking of bread, our Holy Communion, as we know it today had not been established, but Jesus refers to it (6:51) a few verses later, in his words, 'The bread that I will give is my flesh, which is given that the world may have life. And (6:54) 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his Blood, you cannot possess eternal life. An obscure if not barbaric idea for those early Jews, for Jews were not allowed to drink blood.

But in Jesus' thinking, this means receiving and assimilating him fully. John associates the Bread with a personal reception of Christ, not purely as a transient form of physical nourishment but so that he becomes our very Life.

The second of these signs is 'I am the Light of the World. ((8:12). It reflects one of the great themes of John's Gospel. as it stresses the difference between Light and Darkness, between Good and Evil, between Life and Death.

The sign comes before the parable of the Man born blind; it was as if Jesus knew that his followers would find the concept difficult, and needed to see it actually happen.

‘He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the Light of Life.’ (8:12). The word Light to the Jews had long been associated with the language of God. To them it was the name of the expected Messiah, and while Jesus himself knew that he was that expected One, the Jews saw his claim as blasphemy.

The next two signs come very close together, and in a way are interdependent. ‘I am the Door of the Sheep’ and ‘I am the Good Shepherd’. Last week Judy gave us a very clear description of the life of the shepherd and how he cares for his sheep. In the summer, when the weather is warmer, the sheep stay out in the fields at night, going into a small fold; the shepherd himself sleeps across the doorway to protect them. Jesus, in his claim to be the ‘door of the sheep’ implies that to reach God, his followers must first come through him. As the Door, Jesus represents the way to the Christian life, and it has been associated with Baptism, as the initiation rite into the Christian way of life.

In the winter the sheep are brought back to the village at night, and may well be kept in communal folds.

What are the qualities required to be a Good Shepherd? The function of a shepherd is primarily to care for his sheep and to keep them safe. He is prepared to lay down his life for his sheep, which is exactly what Jesus was later to do. He knew each of his sheep by name, who would respond to his voice when he called them from the communal fold each morning.

In these first four signs Jesus takes examples familiar to the people – as he did with many of the parables of the first three Gospels. Although he made claims that were not fully understood at the time, they were based on everyday examples and were at least familiar to them.

From this time on, the group associated with Jesus becomes quickly smaller in number.

The fifth sign is ‘I am the Resurrection and the Life’ (11:25) and is part of the dialogue where Martha is angry with Jesus for not being with them when his friend Lazarus died. Jesus brings Lazarus back to life, and it has long been interpreted that Jesus is anticipating his own death and resurrection. Jesus continued, ‘He that believes on me, even though he die, shall live to eternity, and everyone that lives and believes on me shall never die’ But Martha and Jesus are talking past each other, for while Martha is a good Jewess, she cannot see past the teaching that everyone will rise on the last day. She does not recognize that fellowship with Jesus provides participation in the divine life which precedes death; that for Lazarus, that promise of divine life was present before his dying and resurrection. This is the family that Jesus had become very close to during his ministry, and the story records a side of Jesus that is rarely seen – a show of emotion – ‘Jesus wept’. (Also, incidentally, the shortest sentence in the Bible – just two words!).

The sixth sign, and the one we heard in our Gospel reading for today is, 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.' (14:6) Jesus is with a small group of intimate disciples and followers, taking part in the Last Supper, possibly the Passover Meal for that year. It was a meal of surprises. Jesus had become their servant, by washing their feet. This was soon followed by Judas suddenly leaving the group, not to return; his leaving was followed by another short sentence 'And it was night.' A comment not only on the darkness of the night, but on the evil that prompted Judas' departure. And having given the disciples the instruction to love one another, Jesus tells them again that he is about to leave them. While he has told them often, they did not want to hear, and protested and asked questions.

The seventh sign is 'I am the True Vine, and my Father is the Vinedresser. (15:1). After the supper, Jesus and his disciples left the Upper Room, and went towards the Temple, pausing in the gardens. Jesus drew their attention to a golden vine, growing luxuriantly over the gateway. Since Old Testament times, the symbol for Israel had been a vine. Jesus reminded them about the need for a productive vine to be pruned regularly and strongly. Old wood, diseased or dead wood should be cut out and burned. The good and productive branches should be cut back firmly, to promote strong growth for the new season. Commentators will suggest that Judas represented the wood to be cut out and burned, and the other disciples as the branches to be cut back, due to the shock and grief of losing the One they loved and had followed for three amazing years, thus equipping them to be fruitful in their future ministries.

And so we come to the point where the seven signs are put together to create one complete and perfect person, Jesus. And ask ourselves how can we, Christians of today, live our lives, based on this metaphor, to become more like Jesus, and better able to connect with God.

Let me remind you of the seven signs that help us to define the man who is Jesus: the Bread of Life; the Light of the World; the Door of the Sheep; the Good Shepherd; the Resurrection and the Life; the Way, the Truth and the Life, and the True Vine.

What for us today can we identify with spiritual food? We can read our Bibles, we can come to church regularly, we can receive Communion regularly. We can pray – not only to bring our own needs and the needs of others before God, but also to listen to God. We can attend seminars and group meetings, and we can listen to the inspired wisdom of each other.

And what about connecting with the light? Probably all of these, and perhaps adding the spiritual exercise of discernment – a way of finding God's will for us through prayer and talking things through with a 'trusted other' as our Vicar John used to suggest. Asking for Jesus' light to be cast upon our needs and questions. Recognising the light that shines from others as they lead out their lives and help us with ours.

And there are those who have and exercise their spiritual gifting – we can get alongside and support them in their ministries. And we can look at ourselves to discern our gifting, and ways to use it creatively.

Some of us have the spiritual gifting of evangelism, which can be used for gathering new Christians, who can help the flock to grow, and benefit from the care of the Good Shepherd.

And we can look at our own lives and consider the advantages of pruning in the way that Jesus spoke of the Vine. There may be a need for a sense of confession as we put behind us the things that we have done which we ought not to have done.

I am sure that with other personal reflection we can each think of other ways to relate with Jesus.

Prayer: Eternal God, your Son Jesus Christ, is the Way, the Truth and the Life for all creation; grant us grace to walk in his way, to rejoice in his truth and to share his risen life; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Followed by Joy Cowley's Psalms down-under, Jesus said: I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.

<https://livingword.net.nz/psalms-down-under-joy-cowley>

Commentaries used in preparation of the above –

- Words of Life from John the Beloved by Frances Hogan
- Readings in St John's Gospel by William Temple
- The Daily Study Bible by William Barclay