

I Am is the way, that is, the truth and the life  
*Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*

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There are many great scenes in the film Titanic, a film that has been justly praised for astounding technical feats, as well as for many, many other features.

One scene that I want to recall to the attention of those who have seen the film (and, for the one or two of you who haven't, I'll try to be as visual as possible) was the scene where the young couple, Jack the impetuous, lower middle class fellow who has fallen in love with the wealthy, young Rose, head down to steerage and encounter a great party where everyone is dancing, and smoking and drinking. It is the life of people who may not have it all made, but the place just boils with fun and activity. Rose finds herself drawn in and soon she is dancing, captured by the atmosphere and, almost assuredly, what she has drunk. It is a scene of great celebration of people intoxicated with drink, yes, but also with the joy of dancing and of love.

It is a remarkable scene in contrast with the slow-moving, pretentious life on the upper decks, where no one wants to move too quickly or be seen to be exerting himself or herself in any way. On the lower deck, everyone, no matter from what family or country, has joined together in one rousing frolic -- one last, rousing frolic as it tragically turns out -- regardless of family or social status or country of origin. On the upper deck, everyone, no matter how much they have or how alike they all look, appears to be separated from each other and certainly from any one also on the ship by walls that are taller than the ship is high. What they were interested in was family and family ties: which families to be seen with, which families to marry into and, above all, which family they are from, because that is the key to everything else.

### **What separates us?**

If I were to ask you what it is that separates us as people, one from another, there would be many answers that you would be able to give. Some of us chew our fingernails, some of us don't. Hmm, not too serious. Some of us support the Senators, some of us support the Maple Leafs. Hmm, still not too bad. Some of us are male and some are female. Hmm. Some of us are poor and some are rich. Hmm. Some of us were born in Canada of families that came from another country, some of us were born in those other countries. Hmm.

But, of all the things that separate people in the world today I want to tell you that the most serious and the one that presents us with the highest walls of separation is family.

For millennia, peoples lives have been shaped and fostered by family. They have been told who they are by which family they were born in. Where people have been born and grown up, married, had children and died, has always been, until very recently, determined by family, kin, clans. The other, the enemy, is always of another clan, another set of kin, another family. The

earliest training in family all but hard-wires our thinking. As a Kosovar, I say the word "Serb" and immediately I get a reaction.

They have been told who their enemies were by who it was who was different from them. Those of us who grew up in small towns know that such rivalries exist between every small town and its neighbour. The town I grew up, the little town of Quimby, Iowa, population 369, was just down the road from Washta, Iowa, population 350. The people from Quimby knew the Washta people as "Washta River Rats" and the people of Washta knew us as the "Quimby Queers". (Those were days before the use of that word would have gotten you hauled to court.) We used to fight it out on the sports fields or on the playground.

That's not too serious. But, what do you think that Serbs teach their children about Kosovars, and what do Kosovars teach their children about Serbs? They might live close to each other, but they're not family. They're enemies, better dead than alive, and one day, God be praised, God will kill them all.

Did you know that in Russia, where the crisis with the little region of Chechnya still drags on, Russian mothers for centuries have told their children at night not to watch out for the bogeyman or the monsters but to watch out for the Chechnyan. Little Russians grow up to become Russian soldiers who, all their lives, have been taught to despise and to fear Chechnyans, who are better dead than those who can pose a threat to my family.

It happens in Ireland; it happens in Africa; it happens among first peoples of every continent; it happens among Americans. My kids, growing up in Ottawa, not a small town, have learned that in their school rivalries exist between kids who come from one country and those who come from another. And, it's not the fact that they come from the "country" that makes the difference: it's their ethnic background, and by ethnic we mean "family".

## **Symbols of Difference**

In each of these cultures, where family is the key to identity, the rabbis or the priests or the wise men or the shamans have always set before the people a focus of the people's attention, something that would epitomise, emblematised, their uniqueness, their specialness as a family. Something that would make them special and different from everyone else, who would thus become an enemy. That's where it all starts. I wonder if it's such a bad thing in Canada that we can't appear to find this focus. We are constantly debating what makes us Canadian: a game, a beer, what is it? It's partly because we're not a real family in the cultural sense that we have this difficulty, a land that works in practice but not in theory. I wonder if it is such a bad thing.

For the Jews, for example, this focus was the Law. Jews, brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, living all over the Holy Land, some even living in foreign lands, knew that they were family, and that they were special but the rabbis had taught them that what made them special was the Law. The rabbis taught that God had assembled all the nations of the world at the base of Mt. Sinai and had offered all of the nations the Law. But, only the family of Jacob, the 12 tribes of Israel, had said "yes, we will accept the Law". So, all those other families were by nature, not in a way that they could help, sinners, enemies of God, and enemies of Israel.

The rabbis spoke of the Law that made the Jews different from everyone else in various ways. Some of them were as life-giving bread, or life-giving water, or as a door, or simply as life-giving. For them, the Law was the way of truth, the way that, if you followed it, you would be acceptable to God and all would be OK. The goal of studying the Law intently and attentively was to be able to be right with God in the fullest possible way.

In the Gospel of John, there are a number of times that Jesus will present his followers with statements that would have reminded any Jewish believer of what the rabbis taught in the family gatherings called the synagogue, places where the law was taught and studied. The difference was that Jesus used to say these things about himself: He didn't tell people that the Law was living, life-giving bread or water, or truth, or life itself; he told them: "I am the bread of life", or "I am the door", or "I am the resurrection and the life", or, "I am the way, the truth, and the life".

What Jesus appears to be saying is that he, not the Law, is the bread of life, or the door, or the resurrection and the life, or the way, the truth and the life. He appears to be saying to his Jewish family members that he, not the law, is bread that gives life, that he, not the Law, is an opening to a way, that he, not the Law, is the way to a life that that outlasts death, that he, not the Law, is truth and life itself. In the minds of his Jewish family, it would be hard to mistake what Jesus was saying, but it would have been equally hard to understand what Jesus meant. For, what could it possibly mean that attentiveness to Jesus rather than to the Law, would allow one to see how to be right with God and to understand truth itself? Isn't it strange?

### **The transformation of the symbol**

Jesus transforms these symbols, these ways of talking about the Law, to refer to himself. But, how does he do so?

Let's think first about "truth". Throughout John's Gospel, truth is another way of talking about what really is. Truth tells me, when I cannot see for myself, what lies ahead of me. Imagine a new generation of cars, equipped with computer systems and voice response that, when you are driving through an intense fog and can barely see the hood in front of you, what lies in front of you: the road, the shoulder, a curve, an accident, a tire, etc. The author of the Gospel of John, like authors of many Eastern religions, sees the world around us as wrapped in a dense fog, in night-time darkness.

But, we could also think about "life". Jesus speaks of himself not only as the way to know what really is, but also to know life itself. What Jesus means by life becomes clear throughout the rest of the Gospel of John. What he means is true life, not the life that we look around us and see, anymore than the child who looks around from inside the womb would see the womb and think that that was life and all there was to life. Is life in the womb life? Of course, it is. But, is it all there is to life? Of course not. It is transitory. Furthermore, if one stays there, it will become oppressive as one grows and one will ultimately die.

And, as the child in the womb probably does not know of any other existence beyond, so the people to whom Jesus speaks appear not to know of any other life. What Jesus holds out to them is the truth that know a life that is more like life within the womb than without but that there is another life. What they know is safe; it is comfortable; everything is provided for. Families at

the best of times are like that: safe, comfortable, everything is provided for, all can be asked for without incurring any debt. But, as one grows, one needs air, more space, life. What is fully true is never limited to the family context, though families will always strive to make it appear that it does.

In the crucial, pivotal verses of the opening of John's Gospel we are told that what Jesus holds out for all who find themselves in this restrictive situation is a new birth: to all who received him, he freed them from what bound them and brought them forth out of the womb into the light of day. And he calls these offspring, not the offspring of a woman, not the offspring of a man, not even the offspring of a couple, but the offspring of God!

Unfortunately, throughout the course of its history there have been many times that the church has itself fallen prey to re-creating the divisions of family, recreating the situation in the womb, from which the Gospel had freed new Christians who had once been at war with those who are now brothers and sisters in Christ. Christians, some out of ill-will, some out of naivete, have rekindled the enmity that arises between family members and between families. There have been many times that the churches, in the name of Jesus, have tried to identify one ethnic group, one tribe, one clan, as God's chosen clan, God's chosen tribe, God's chosen ethnic community, God's chosen family. Every time the church has done that it has struck a blow on the face of God by saying to God: these are our children, my family; we are not all your offspring. The creation of denominations or the claim of one family grouping to be the only true church have equally struck blows against God's fatherly care of His offspring.

Family is like the womb: crucible of life, eventual death unless one escapes. And the results are clear of how oppressive family can become: the former Yugoslavia, Ireland, Indonesia, Israel, Rwanda. I know something about this from the situation in Spain. I lived there for 10 years. In the early 70's I studied economics at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. I had many great professors while there. All of them were there because they could no longer teach at the still-fascist-run University of Barcelona. These were the brightest of the generation of the 60's, all of them supporters of liberation and against totalitarianism.

One of the professors who assisted from time to time was Ernest Lluch. I didn't know him well, but respected him, as I respected all of my teachers. In later years, after Franco had died and a Socialist government had come to power in 1982, Lluch, like other professors I had had, served in the Socialist government of Felipe Gonzalez. Lluch served as minister of Health and Consumer Affairs. During, and after, his service in the Ministry, he also served for a long period of time as professor of Economics at the University of Barcelona, now an equally stimulating intellectual centre. He turned 63 this year.

In September of last year, he wrote an article in a Barcelona newspaper against ETA, the Basque terrorist network that was defended in November by that sometime Canadian hero and so-called victim of US imperialism, Fidel Castro. In his article Lluch attacked ETA for what it is: a clan that no longer see, that is so blind to anything outside of its own existence, that it will stop at nothing and at no one to achieve power and control.

As evidence of their ruthless drive toward power, Lluç reminded all Spaniards of who ETA's first victim had been: a little girl, less than 2 years old, killed in ETA's first bomb attack in 1960. She wasn't Basque, so it was OK. The article spared no words. He wrote:

"It was a brutal deed, one that belies the attempt to give a political, liturgical, and transcendental meaning of epic proportions to ETA's action. It was a shameful first act of existence, ETA's act of original sin. ETA began by taking innocent blood and now it must keep killing those who would reveal that original sin."

I learned a few weeks ago that Ernest Lluç had been killed by a bomb set by ETA in Barcelona. ETA, it seems like the demons who confronted Jesus, is tormented when someone speaks the truth about it. So it is with members of human families when they are attacked.

These family conflicts have spilled over for millennia into religion, and though less today, into denominations and churches. It may appear to be less so today, but don't be too sure. When differences over who we can eat or not eat with still exist, it seems to me that we are not much beyond the situation for which Paul chastised Peter in Galatians.

God has been astoundingly patient. But do not be deceived. God is not mocked, because God, though the churches may not think so, is not the churches' client: he is their reigning Lord. Do not be deceived, therefore, by the humble Jesus, for there is one more thing to say about Jesus' way, that is, as one who is truth and who is life, than we have yet said.

For, who IS this one who says I am the way, the truth, the life? Is it Jesus. Well, yes. But who is Jesus, if not, as John tells us, the Word made flesh. And who is the Word, if not the one who, since time began, has been God's voice to the whole created order.

But, what is that voice's name? Men and women have given the voice many times over time, even throughout the Bible. Usually, it is the name of a family member, making God just like us. But, the only time that the voice ever names itself is when, speaking with Moses, from the burning bush, the voice names itself: I am who I am.

What Jesus tells his human family members throughout the Gospel of John is not to focus on him, the earthly Jesus, the family member as door, as living bread, as living water, as resurrection and life, as way, that is the truth and the life. Rather, he tells them, in something that regularly eludes readers of John's Gospel: I AM is the way, the truth and the life; I AM is the resurrection and the life; I AM is the living water and the living bread; and Jesus says, I AM that I AM.

Now, at this point, many people are often stunned to hear such an assertion. Many people stop and say, but, if that is what Jesus is saying, then the Jews should either have bowed in awesome fear before the one who appeared to Moses or pick up stones to stone such unutterable blasphemy. And, in fact, they do both. When Jesus says to the Jews that before Abraham was, I AM, they pick up stones. They do not do so because he is saying that he is thousands of years old, but, as my colleague, the Jewish biblical scholar Alan Segal has written, because they understand perfectly well that he is saying that he is the one who appeared not only to Abraham but also to Moses as God, I AM who I AM. And, when, in the garden on the

night of his capture, the temple police and Roman cohort come looking for Jesus, he asks them for whom they are looking and they tell him Jesus of Nazareth, do not think that the 600 Roman soldiers and however many Temple police are there fall to the ground in fear because he says to them as many of your Bible translations have "I am he" or "That's me ". They fall to the ground because he utters the words that cause the heavens themselves to shake: I AM: the one standing before you is I AM.

## Conclusion

My friends, at this point, words fail me, as they failed the much greater Moses. But, we have even more reason in our day to be overwhelmed by the implications of this text than people prior to us had. Over against the immensity that is the cosmos, evidenced in such outstanding complexity and grandeur for us as astrophysicists in one direction and molecular biologists in another reveal more of it year by year, over against the immensity of the cosmos that consists of the pillars of creation of the Eagle Nebula or the genomic map, over all of which, and more, our God reigns, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, our family divisions, replicated in our denominational divisions and ecclesiastical turf wars, are so petty and so insignificant, as to be embarrassing and ridiculous, an insult to the divine majesty before whom we all bow in honour and who silences discordant voices.

How dare we? How dare we take the creative energies of a God who as Father engenders and as Mother conceives and brings forth offspring and then fight over whose offspring they really are? These offspring, who continue to come to birth, in our midst and around the world, are brought into our midst. We, the older family members who are given to care for them, what do we do: we split them off from the rest of the family and tell them who is really their brother and who is their sister and who isn't. We put weapons into their hands and whisper in their ears who their real brothers and sisters are and then tell them to go forth. Oh, we may not do so explicitly any more. But, we still do so in the ways our families meet, and eat together or don't eat together. We do so by modeling before the world what it means to be God's family, either dysfunctionally or divinely.

How dare we make our task the task of separation and division as priests and ministers and pastors when what God has entrusted us with is the ministry shown most vividly at the wedding at Cana, a ministry not of division and separation, a ministry of power and leadership, but a ministry of ensuring celebration. Jesus is no priest at Cana, no church official sent to make sure that the water of purification gets used for the right purpose. Jesus ensures that the celebration of the wedding of a couple, out of which that culture necessarily understood that new family members would come.

What is important is not the union of social institutions or religious corporations or even the attempt to get families to speak together and then go their own separate ways. What is important is the refashioning of a new family that has no limits, that has no walls, a family of those who truly exist because they worship the Father in Spirit and in Truth, wherever they worship, whenever, and however. What is important is that there is family of those who are brought to birth into a true reality through the door of the I AM, those who, regardless of their institutional affiliation or lack thereof, have, in their hearts, yearned with all their heart, soul, mind and strength for Jesus.

And so, let us celebrate, let us dance and celebrate together as a family that is not divided. Let the ministers of God have one task in this family: to ensure that celebration happen in this great, ever growing, never limited nor limiting family of our God, whose mercy is wider than we can ask or ever imagine it to be.