

*Before Abraham was, I AM*

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Who are you? During Lent and especially on this Passion Sunday, we are invited to consider how we define our identity. We are invited to move past the usual, past our namesakes, family pedigrees, our hometowns, alma maters, favorite sports teams, and bad habits. The Gospel and the Church's season of Lent challenges us to consider who we really are when all these things have been taken away? In following the scriptures and the teaching of the Church we learn that our identities are to be rooted solely in Jesus Christ. Are we comfortable with an identity solely in Jesus Christ? And if we strive to truly live Christian lives, defining ourselves totally in Jesus Christ, do we fear what our families and friends will think? Are we willing to risk being labeled as "too religious" or "too Christian" or maybe even "a little too Catholic"? Or do we have spiritual low self-esteem? Do we think we are not good enough, or saintly enough to say of ourselves, *my identity is totally and completely in Jesus Christ*. Can we say along with St. Patrick, *I am certain in my heart that all that I am, I have received from God*? Can we go yet one more step and say with him, *If I have any worth, it is to live my life for God*?

The Pharisees that we hear about today in the Gospel, those who came close to stoning Jesus not just this once, but a couple of other times too, identified and defined themselves by their sect of Judaism, as Pharisees or Sadducees, but most importantly as biological descendants of Abraham. They could trace their family trees all the way back to Adam and Eve. They also prided themselves on how well they kept the ritual law of Moses. They devoutly kept their rituals and said their prayers with precision. They were proud of God's covenant with Abraham, that the nations would be blessed in them, his descendants. Not only did they believe that they were continuing in the faith of Abraham, but they also counted themselves holy because Abraham was in their family tree. They were the sort of people who thought they could get into heaven on the coattails of their righteous ancestors' pedigree and their good works. Then along comes Jesus, who calls all of this into question and tells them they have strayed far from the truth and from God. The law they were so obsessed with could only take them so far, but He could bring them even further into a relationship with God. Yet the Pharisees, unable to accept the teaching of Jesus, asks Him who He is. They want to know how He defines Himself. Is He a Pharisee or a Sadducee? Is he a lunatic or a madman? He seemed to them to be a Rabbi, a Rabbi who works miracles, even miracles on the Sabbath. Is this Jesus a prophet? Is He John the Baptist raised from the dead? No, none of these things, and yet more. Jesus reveals to them, *before your father Abraham was, I AM*.

Jesus' response may seem a little cryptic to some. But of course, we remember the words from the Gospel, *In the beginning was the Word*. Jesus' response, *before your father Abraham was, I AM*, makes perfect sense considering St. John's Gospel. But this exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees happened before that Gospel was written. What is going on here is Jesus is telling them that He has always existed. He implies that He existed also before Abraham's covenant and that Abraham rejoiced over Him, and then to top it all off, He uses the familiar and holy phrase, *I AM*. Make no mistake about it, Jesus is telling them He is God, and it incites the Pharisees to take up stones to throw at Jesus for what they perceive to be blasphemy. Now the Pharisees have all the proof they need to try and get Jesus sentenced to death. He has admitted to them that He defines Himself as God, and let no modern atheist try to tell you otherwise. They have heard this Name before, *I AM*, from the Book of Exodus when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush and said, *you shall tell Pharaoh, I AM that I AM has sent you*.

Jesus has left them with no choice, it would be convenient to define Him as only a poor rabbi, but now they can define Him for themselves. They should either fall at His feet and worship Him or, according to their law, stone Him to death. Everyone who has ever heard the Gospel has been confronted with the same decision. Do we believe Jesus is who He says He is, or do we take him for a madman or just a great moral teacher? We hear this morning that He would not have us believe that He is a madman or a great moral teacher. A madman might very well let himself be stoned to death; a great moral teacher may very well allow himself to be crucified. We might speculate whether a madman or a great moral teacher would have incited the type of cruel death that Jesus endured. Blessed John Keble, the great English Priest of the mid 1800's would remind us all that it was indeed, *God Almighty who endured all this, God Almighty who sat down and ate the Passover with His disciples, God Almighty who broke bread the bread and blessed it and said 'this is my body,' God Almighty who washed His disciples feet, who sweated blood in His agony, who permitted Judas to kiss Him, who was chained, dragged along, reviled and buffeted...It was God Himself, appearing among them, whom they put to death amid their railings and blasphemies*.

In the next couple of weeks we must also remember that Jesus said, *no one takes my life from me, I lay it down freely, and I, if I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me*. Jesus' death is more than just a cessation of life, but a life-giving sacrifice for us all. His life and death are foretold in countless prophecies centuries before. His death was foretold even by the Law of

Moses in the Old Testament. This the very law upon which the Pharisees based their identities, over which they became so obsessed with, that system of ritual cleanness and sacrifice that was meant to prepare them to recognize the true Lamb of God when He stood among them. They did not recognize Jesus when He came because there was no life in their self-proclaimed identities, and regardless of their religiosity, of their ritual cleanness and perfect sacrifices, their hearts were still covered over in sin. There was no life in the old Law, no freedom, and no identity to be found in it.

Let us remember this passion Sunday, that *the old things have passed away, behold the new has come* all because of Jesus Christ. Let us remember that the passion and crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the life-giving source that we can find our true identities in. This is only possible because He died freely for each one of us, individually and corporately. We are given an identity in Christ through the waters of Baptism, and through the bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Holy Communion. The lives of countless saints, and especially the life of St. Patrick attest to the fact that we will never find ourselves completely in anyone or anything else, because only in Jesus Christ is Life. His life saving Death and Passion is our source of true life and true freedom as it was for St. Patrick. There is no other way, no other source of life than through Jesus Christ, God made man. He who is the *I AM* in the flesh wants nothing more than to take away the veils that are over our hearts. And He begins this process anew this morning, by piercing through the veil, by making Himself present to us this morning through the humble elements of bread and wine. Amen.