



Opening Responses for Eastertide

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
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'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

What does Jesus being the way, the truth and the life mean for you?
Why might this text need some careful handling?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Glory to you, O God:
your raised Jesus from the grave,
bringing us victory over death and giving us eternal life.

Glory to you, O Christ:
for us and for our salvation you overcame death,
and opened the gate to everlasting life.

Glory to you, O Holy Spirit:
you lead us into the truth, show us the way,
and breathe new life into us.

**Glory to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
now and forever. Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 31:1 – 5, 15 – 16

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.
Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.
You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,
take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.

Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.
My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead,
opening the way to everlasting life,
both in the here-and-now, and throughout all that is to come.

Let us therefore bring to God those things in need of renewal:
We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the times we've failed to love one another:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the injustices and oppression in our world:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the failings and disunity of your Church:

Restore us and heal us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of new beginnings,

of love stronger than even death,

you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.

Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,

and breathe new life into us. **Amen**

Reading John 14:1 – 14

Sermon

One of the unique features of John's Gospel is a collection of seven sayings, in which Jesus reveals particular aspects of his identity, as God's Son and as Israel's Messiah. These 'I am' sayings draw upon a range of word-pictures, reminding us of how Jesus's teaching was much more poetical than propositional, and which serve to stimulate our imaginations. Several of them are organic metaphors relating to everyday things, like water and bread, or to aspects of life within the agricultural society of his day, such as vines and shepherds. Others are more difficult to grapple with, and the 'I am' saying found in John 14:6 is perhaps the most challenging of all. In it, Jesus declares that he is the way, the truth and the life, and that nobody comes to know

God the Father except through him. This text has been used to back up the argument that Christianity is the only valid faith tradition, and that anyone who is not a Christian cannot possibly know God. Given that taking the biblical witness seriously means not ignoring difficult passages, it begs the question of how to make sense of this saying, especially in a multi-faith society such as ours.

A good reading of the Bible needs to bring three elements together, and hold them in balance. These are the historical context of a given passage (relating in this case to the hostility faced by the community from which John's Gospel emerged), the intention of the author, and our perspectives as readers, with the lenses that we all look through as we wrestle with the Scriptures. The emphases we place on each of these three components will vary, but when our readings become skewed too heavily in any one direction or another, they risk ending up being unbalanced, pulling the text 'out of shape' and distorting it, rather than allowing it to come to life, and speak into our context. In the most extreme cases, a lack of proper attention to all three areas runs the risk of creating 'texts of terror' (to borrow a phrase from the great feminist theologian Phyllis Tribble) which must be challenged. Readings violating the fundamental principle that everyone matters to God fall short of the standards of 'good reading' to which we must endeavour to hold ourselves. So, with this in mind, let's take a closer look at today's passage.

It is generally agreed that John's Gospel was the last one of the four Canonical Gospels to be written, around 90 to 95 CE. By that stage, sharp divisions had opened up between the fledgling churches and the Jewish synagogues, especially because the total destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 CE had led to profound questioning about the true identity of God's people, and made it way harder to hold differing perspectives together. To add to this, Rome continued to persecute Christian communities, suppressing anyone who did not publicly pledge their ultimate allegiance to the Emperor,

who was seen as a 'son of god' and hence a divine figure. Together, these things meant that the faith community out of which this Gospel emerged was under a vast amount of sustained pressure. For many commentators, this backdrop shaped the binary worldview within it, such that its primary theme is belonging – a given person was either an insider or an outsider, with no grey areas in between. Now, if this is correct, the exclusivist tone of John 14:6 can be placed in context: this is the view of a persecuted church, struggling in an environment of rejection and fragility.

So, that is the historical context, but what about the intentions of the Gospel writer? Well, any comparison with the three earlier accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ reveals that John's framing is the most overtly theological, presenting him as somebody consciously aware of his relationship of divine equality with God the Father as the Word made flesh (John 1:18). We see these dynamics when he deals with the doubts and questions of Thomas and Philip, by reminding his two friends that to see him is to see God the Father (14:7, 14:9), and perhaps most obviously in the way those who were to arrest him in Gethsemane fell down in worship (18:6). Within this, the 'I am' sayings function to illuminate varied aspects of his divinity. The earliest Christians were called 'Followers of the Way' and Jesus being thus described highlights his unity with God. In a world where Caesar claimed to have brutal overlordship, Jesus is the truth in that he embodies the light and love of God (1:4). Most importantly, Jesus came to bring the life and freedom of God in all of its fullness (10:10) and so it is fitting that he is identified directly with that life. The usage of these images in 14:6 reveals, in short, key things about God.

Finally, we need to consider our perspectives as readers of this text, and in particular how our approach to interfaith dialogue informs the way we interpret it. Broadly speaking, most approaches fall into one of three categories, which we may picture as like scaling a mountain with God at the summit. An *exclusivist* approach claims there is only

one pathway to the top, given by Christianity, while at the other end of the spectrum, a *pluralist* approach allows for multiple and equally valid routes that ultimately reach the same endpoint so that all faiths may lead us to God. The intermediate stance of *inclusivism* regards Christianity as the only way to reach the summit but with others able to provide a route leading at least some way towards it. Now, John's famous saying most obviously lends itself to an exclusivist mindset, and is deeply problematic to many pluralists. For my part, I've learnt a great deal from people of other faiths, as much as there comes a point where I have to stand on God's being as we find in Christ.

Consequently, one way to make sense of John 14:6 is to picture the verse as telling us that Jesus is like a window through which we can see the nature and the character of God. Just as Thomas and Philip were reminded that they'd seen the Father precisely because they'd seen Jesus, so we can glimpse the light and the love of God through him. It points towards the divine nature of God-in-Christ even as the difference between the context in which it was written down and our own culture means that we will need to handle it with care. The view afforded to us when we look through this 'window onto the divine' is of a pathway of intimate relationship with God, of the truth of love in human flesh, and of fullness and abundance of life. Hence, it makes sense to me to name Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, and I hope you might find it helpful too. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Andrea Skevington's 2019 text *Jesus Said, 'I Am'* explores how the sayings of Jesus about himself can be transformative.

Prayers of Intercession

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world".

We pray for those enduring the darkness and despair of war, and all who work for peace across our broken world.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life".

We pray for those in need of nourishment and sustenance,
and all who struggle to believe they are worth nourishing.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life".

We pray for those in positions of power and authority,
and all who seek justice for themselves and others.

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd".

We pray for those who feel lost, isolated or abandoned,
and all who use their time and talents to reach out to others.

Jesus said, "I am the true vine".

We pray for those who feel God absent or distant from them,
and all who are desperate to abide in the love of God.

Jesus said, "I am the gate of the sheepfold".

We pray for those who share the good news of God's love,
and all who enable churches to be places of warm welcome.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life".

We pray for those who are bereaved or struggling with loss,
and all who are unwell in body, mind or spirit.

In a time of quiet reflection,
we now bring to God our prayers for those on our hearts,
and for our own needs at this time
as we seek to keep the rumour of God alive...

Lord's Prayer

Final Prayer – Collect for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

Eternal God, whose Son Jesus Christ
is the way, the truth and the life:
grant us to walk in his way,
to rejoice in his truth,

and to share his risen life;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Blessing

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

May the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
fill us with resurrection hope,
and remain upon us and all whom we love and pray for,
now and throughout eternity. **Amen**