

SERMON: Famous Names

¹⁴ God said to Moses, I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'

If I were to ask you now for a famous name for the moment what would you say? Andy Murray? Michael Jackson?

Famous names are used for endorsements, for advertising of goods, for promotion of issues. Their expertise and experience sells. Whether it is the name of an individual or a brand, famous names speak with authority. Whether it is on the tennis court, in the supermarket or in discussions on the hot topics of the day the opinion of the famous matter.

One of the most famous people in the land: Her Majesty the Queen. Endorsements by the Queen are worth having. By royal appointment guarantees success. The coins in our pockets and purses bear her symbols of authority. And our national passport. This immediately tells of citizenship – mine is a UK passport – and carries the authority and protection of the crown and its government.

Names carry weight - authority – power. It is not always what you know but who you know.

In the Bible names are especially important. Names carry meaning. People are renamed by God at significant points.

They are simply a convenient label but reflect who someone is. And in today's reading it is God himself who is being named.

What is the context of our reading? God has just commanded Moses to go to Egypt and to bring his people Israel out of captivity. But Moses, if you remember, although he had been brought up as a prince of Egypt, was now a fugitive wanted for murder. He was obviously rather reluctant to return. His reluctance made worse by his self doubts as a leader.

Moses says to God in verse 13, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations."

If names in the bible are understood as significant then when GOD names himself, we may be sure the name is packed full of meaning as to who he is and what he intends to do. God does not choose names for himself at random. He chooses names for the sake of revealing things about himself that will deepen our love for him and strengthen our faith.

God gives three answers to the question, "What shall I tell them your name is?"

Firstly in verse 14 God says, "I AM WHO I AM."

Secondly in verse 14 God says, "I AM has sent me to you."

His third answer in verse 15 God says, "Yahweh ... has sent me to you ... this is my name for ever ..."

I am who I am. Is it one of those answers that at first glance may not seem to answer the question. It may confuse rather than clarify. It is almost a sphinx-like riddle.

I am who I am. If you or were to use the phrase that would tell nothing about us apart from revealing perhaps an awkward or stubborn streak. But when God says *I am what I am* that speaks volumes about God

Firstly: simply but most profoundly it tells us: God is. 'I am' tells us that God exists. God is reality. This is the most important truth about God: he exists. That is the most important truth for us firstly to acknowledge and then to live by. So many folk will quite readily declare '*Yes I believe in God*'. But is that belief reflected in their lives? I don't mean by attending church on Sunday mornings, although that is a vital part of it, but is God obvious in their thinking and their actions? The Jewish people have prayers for every situation in life from waking to sleeping. This is a clear acknowledgement that God is their God and they are people of God every moment. Are we as clear in our commitment?

Not to acknowledge the 'I am' of God has been likened to accepting an invitation into a rich and powerful man's home To enjoy his hospitality - the beautiful surroundings - the comfort - the good food and wine – but to ignore the host who is providing all these good things.

Secondly: Another truth of God's I AM WHO I AM

is that God's personality and power are owing solely to God and to no other. God 'was' before time, space, creation. God was not made by another. Unlike us who grow and develop through the influence, for good or ill, of encounters with thousands of others including God, God simply 'is'. God has no beginning. God has no ending. On my recent trip to Iona I saw many many of those Celtic patterns, circles and everlasting knots, symbolising the infinite nature of God.

God is. God was. God ever shall be. God is eternal – unchanging. Not cold and distant but safe, secure, solid. Not fickle but faithful. Not temperamental but trustworthy.

Thirdly: God is the one who created everything. God is the source of all things – of all life, all light, all power. Everything is owed to him. Without God we would not exist. But without us God would still be. God says: I AM WHO I AM. God is complete in the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Without creation, without us God is in loving community, in faithful fellowship, in eternal relationship. Lacking nothing. Needing nothing. Any denial on our part of the reality of his existence does not diminish him. It may frustrate his purposes for us for a while but he does not depend on our worship,

praise, adoration, service for his existence. We do not create God. We can only help to reveal who God already is. God is our creator. God created our world. God created us. Not because he needed to. Not to make up for some lack in him. Not because he was under some compulsion. But because God chose to. God chose at the beginning of time to give life to the world; to be our creator; to be our God. God chose for us to be creatures; to be his people.

And throughout human history God continues to choose: to choose us to be his hands and his feet in the world; to choose us to speak in love and to act for justice; to choose to send us where he wants us to go. God said to Moses: tell the people of Israel "I AM has sent me to you." That, for Moses, would be his credentials – his passport. His authority – his security would not be in his own skills and personality but through the who sent him. The great I am; the eternal, all powerful, perfect, whole and holy God. It was I AM who asked Moses to put his trust in him; to go back to Egypt; to lead the people out of slavery and to the promised land. It is the same I AM who asks us to trust and to obey.

The burning bush - the symbol of the church of Scotland - reminds us of that call to Moses as God still calls to us. Jesus Christ whose name as Christians we bear who is our authority and our security answered the criticism of the Jewish leaders. *He said to them "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad."*
The Jews then said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly! I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." John 8:56-58. When Jesus said, "Before Abraham was I AM," he took up all the majesty, the truth, the power of God, wrapped it in the humility of servanthood, offered himself for us and made it possible for us to follow him into glory. Through him we can know the great I AM: Almighty and Eternal God the God who is, who was, who ever shall be.

So glory to the Father, to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now
and will be for ever.

Amen