

4.2.20

Lent 5

In our Gospel for today, taken from chapter eight of John's Gospel, Jesus tells his fellow Jews that anyone who keeps his word will never see death. They are shocked by his statement. After all, Abraham died and the prophets died. "Are you greater than they are?" they ask him. "Are you saying that your word is more powerful than their words and they themselves were?" And Jesus' answer is a clear "yes." "Before Abraham was I am," he answers. The words "I am" are the words used by God to describe Himself when He appears to Moses in a burning bush in the desert. When Moses approached the burning bush, he heard a voice from the bush say to him, "Do not come near. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. . . ." (Exodus 3: 5-6). And then when God gives Moses the message he is to bring to his fellow Jews, Moses says to God: "If I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you, and they ask me, 'What is his name? what do I tell them?'" God replied to Moses: I am who I am. Then he added: This is what you will tell the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you" (Exodus 3: 13-14).

That phrase, "I am who am," sounds so abstract. But for students of scholastic philosophy it has a deeply metaphysical meaning: God simply is. God does not simply share in being, in existing, but simply is, is existence. So God cannot cease to be. And that gift is what Jesus here claims to be able to give to those who believe in him, because he, like God, simply is. He is

who is. In our text we are told that his fellow Jews who heard this outrageous claim made by Jesus, this blasphemy, picked up stone to throw at him.

We, the followers of Jesus, do not often think of him in terms of the God who simply is. It is far easier to think of him as a man who lived and experienced life as we experience it. We can identify with him as we watch him meet other people in everyday life. But we especially identify with him in the difficult moments of his life; for example, when he meets with his friends Martha and Mary who have lost their brother Lazarus and overcome with emotion groans. Indeed here we are told: “And Jesus wept” (John 11: 35). That we can understand. That we can feel. But when we then go to him and ask for help in similar situations, we are accepting him, even without realizing it, as the one who can give us life even in the face of death. We are accepting his claim that he is who is.