I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life
John 13:33 – 14:7

In his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention last week, Donald Trump said, "I alone can fix" America's problems. In a tweet after the Easter Sunday attacks on Christians celebrating in Pakistan he tweeted, "I alone can solve" the problem of Islamist terrorism.

They are shocking, outrageous statements. The problems he's talking about are large, complex, serious issues with no easy answers, and he says that he, and only he, has the answer?

Over the summer we've been working our way through a series on the "I Am" sayings of Jesus. We've acknowledged that they are preposterous, outrageous statements for a person to make about themselves – unless they're true.

Today we've arrived at what is perhaps the best-known "I am" saying of all. But it's also probably the most outrageous and the most controversial because of the exclusive nature of the claim Jesus makes about himself.

But as we approach this passage it's important for us to understand the context in which it comes.

At the beginning of chapter 13, John tells us, "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father."

John's narrative is reaching its climax. Jesus is preparing to leave the world. He is with his disciples in the upper room, sharing the last supper, and in the verses immediately preceding the ones we're looking at today, Judas leaves the room to go and betray Jesus. From that moment on, the clock is ticking. Time is running out. And so Jesus is now preparing his disciples for what is about to happen. For that reason, these

next couple of chapters of John's gospel are known as the farewell discourse.

That's the context. That's the scene. So with that in mind, let's read the passage.

John 13:33 – 14:7

33 Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' **34** A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.**35** By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

36 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward." **37** Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." **38** Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.

14 "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God;[a] believe also in me. **2** In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?[b] **3** And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. **4** And you know the way to where I am going."[c] **5** Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" **6** Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. **7** If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.[d]From now on you do know him and have seen him."

So just to give my comments today a bit of structure I have three headings for you: The preparation; The destination; The way.

First, the preparation.

So Judas has just left the room. And Jesus turns to the 11 men left in the room and says, “Little children”. This is the only time this expression is used in John’s gospel. In our culture if you were at a dinner party or a meeting and the host called everyone else “Little children” you might feel a bit patronised. But here it’s an expression of intimacy. A Passover meal was usually a family affair led by the father of the household, and so it’s an intimate expression fitting for the setting.

And in one sense, everything that follows in this passage must be read through the lens of these words. Jesus is speaking affectionately to his closest friends. And his aim, knowing that time is short, knowing now that he has entered the last hours of his life, knowing that what lies ahead will be bewildering and confusing and shattering for his disciples, is to prepare them not only for the horror of his own execution, but for life without him.

Whenever I have to travel I will usually try to tell the kids a day or two before I go that I am leaving, to give them some time to get used to the idea. That’s what Jesus is doing here.

You see that there in verse 33: “Little children, yet a little while I am with you.” Now, this is not the first time Jesus has said something like this. In fact Jesus himself says that in the next verse:

“You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’

Jesus is referring to two incidents back in chapters 7 and 8 when he tells the Jews that they can’t go with him because they refuse to accept that he comes from God. But there’s a crucial difference here.

Here, as we’ve seen, Jesus is speaking to his closest friends, and out of love for them is preparing them for his departure.

In fact, the love that he has for them is to be the foundation and the model for their life without him. Verse 34:

34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.**35** By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Having told them that he is going, Jesus is now telling them what he wants them to do in his absence. They are to love one another – that is to be the defining mark of what it means to be followers of Jesus. In fact they don't know it yet, but Jesus is about to show them the ultimate example of love by laying down his life for them.

But it seems Peter hasn't heard that part. He didn't hear anything after "I am going away." The attention now turns to the destination.

Peter asks in verse 36: "Lord, where are you going?"

And Jesus replies by giving the same answer he's already given, but by qualifying it slightly:

"Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward."

The disciples will not be able to follow Jesus to the cross, or the tomb, or to the Father when he ascends to heaven. But Jesus is telling them that there will come a time when they will be reunited. But that doesn't satisfy Peter.

Verse 37: "Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."

There's a terrible irony in what Peter says, isn't there? Because in fact exactly the opposite is about to happen: it's Jesus who is going to lay down *his* life for Peter. And not only that, Jesus tells him that he won't even make it through the night without denying him three times.

Peter wants to follow his own way, under his own strength, by the power of his own will. And isn't that what we all try to do? Our natural inclination is to want to save ourselves, to prove our worth. But what Peter is about to discover is that when the moment of testing arrives, he is found sorely wanting. He can't save himself. Ultimately it's not what Peter does for Jesus, or what we can do for Jesus. We depend totally on what he has done for us.

Of course, all of this must have been disturbing for the disciples. Jesus has announced that one of them, his inner circle, will betray him, then followed that up by saying he is about to go away and they can't come with him, and then that by daybreak Peter's insistence that he will stand up for Jesus will lie in tatters.

Their minds must have been reeling. What is going on?

And so in the face of this turmoil, Jesus seeks to comfort them. Chapter 14 verse 1:

"Let not your hearts be troubled." Again, Jesus' underlying intention here is not to confuse or dismay, but to love and prepare his friends for the traumatic events that are about to unfold. "Let not your hearts be troubled." It's easy to say, but in the light of everything Jesus has just told them, how is it that they are supposed to be untroubled?

Jesus' answer is right there: "Believe in God. Believe also in me." The Greek word that John uses here doesn't mean "believe" in the sense of intellectual assent, in the sense of believing that the earth revolves around the sun. It means personal, relational trust. Jesus is asking his disciples to trust him, even in the time of darkness and uncertainty that he knows lies ahead.

But more than that, he's asking them to put the same trust in him that they put in God. He's effectively putting himself on

the same level as God, claiming to be God, which is blasphemy – unless it's true.

And now, as if to settle the confusion about where he is going, Jesus gets even more explicit.

"In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? **3** And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

There's an incredible contrast here between what Jesus said to the Pharisees back in chapters 7 and 8 and what he tells his disciples now about the fact that he is going away. Jesus tells the Pharisees that they cannot come where he is going, that they will be excluded from the Father's presence. But here he's telling his disciples exactly the opposite: that he is in fact going to prepare their place and that they will join him.

So what's the difference? Primarily it's a question of understanding and accepting who Jesus is. The Pharisees reject Jesus' claim to be the son of God, the Messiah, which automatically disqualifies them from being with him. The disciples have accepted Jesus as the Messiah, they know who he is even though they remain confused about where he's going.

And yet despite that confusion, Jesus now turns to the way his disciples are to get to this destination.

Having told them they will be joining him at a later time, Jesus now goes on to say, verse 4: "And you know the way to where I am going."

Except unfortunately, they don't. They're still confused. You can imagine them looking around at each other as if to say: "I don't know the way. Do you know the way? What's he talking about?" And so Thomas pipes up on behalf of everyone: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

In one sense it's a fair question. If we don't know where the destination, how could we know the route? And Thomas's question sets up this famous answer.

When you're listening to your favourite song or piece of music, or watching a film and there's that one moment, that anthemic chorus or guitar solo, or that one line that everything is building up to -- this is that moment. This is the climax of the narrative.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me."

It's one of the most famous verses in the whole Bible. And it's often used as a kind of proof-text about the uniqueness of Jesus and the exclusivity of Christianity. I'll say more about that in a minute, but I think it's important for us to see this comment in context. Remember that Jesus isn't in the temple, isn't in front of a crowd, isn't arguing with the Pharisees here; he's in the upper room, eating his last full meal with his closest friends before his impending death. His intention is not to judge or warn those who don't trust in him, but to comfort and reassure those who do.

But what's so interesting and arresting about this is that Jesus is not just saying that he *knows* the way; He's not just a pioneer or a trailblazer. He isn't *showing* them the way. He claims to *BE* the way.

Every other religion claims to teach the way to God, or to Nirvana or Brahman or Paradise or whatever the end goal is. In Islam the way to God is to follow the way of worship set out by the Prophet Muhammed, including following the five pillars of Islam. In Buddhism, the way to Nirvana is to believe the four noble truths and follow the eightfold path. In Hinduism the way to reach moksha, or enlightenment, is to continually improve your karma incarnation after incarnation, until you exit the cycle of karma altogether.

In Christianity, the way to God is a person. Jesus himself is the bridge to God. No set of human behaviours can get us there. It's only through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, entered into through faith, by putting our trust in him, that we reach God.

In the same way, Jesus doesn't just say that he *speaks* the truth, he claims to *be* the truth.

This is an idea that John has right at the beginning of his book. In chapter 1 he writes, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God… And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth."

In Islam, the Prophet Muhammad is the messenger of God. But in Christianity, Jesus is the message, the word become flesh.

And finally, Jesus doesn't merely offer life, he claims to *be* the life.

Again, this is a theme that is there from the very first page of John's narrative until the last.

Chapter 1: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men."

Chapter 3: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Chapter 6: "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life."

As we heard last week from chapter 11, "I am the resurrection and the life."

And at the very end of his book, John writes, "These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Again and again, John associates Jesus with life.

But how can it be that Jesus, a human being, can claim to be the embodiment of the way to God, can claim to be The Truth incarnate, can claim to be the life?

The answer comes two verses later:

"If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Jesus claims to be the very incarnation of God. If you have seen him, you have seen the Father. It is because he is the true representation *of* God, and because through his resurrection that he offers life *in* God, that he can be the way *to* God.

And not just *one* way to God. Jesus makes the astonishing claim that he is the *only* way to God:

"No-one comes to the Father except through me."

We have to be honest that this is troubling – if we are not troubled by the fact that billions of people face an eternity cast out of God's presence, whatever that looks like, then either cold blood pumps through our veins or we have not properly grasped the gravity of what Jesus is saying here.

Some of us have husbands or wives, children or parents, friends, colleagues, neighbours and others close to us who don't share our faith, or who are even antagonistic towards it. And this text is saying that if they continue to reject Jesus, if they refuse to acknowledge him as the Son of God, they will be excluded from his presence.

That seems unfair to us. It hurts. So how do we respond? One way many people respond is to pretend the text doesn't say what it says, that God will not really judge. The problem with that is we stop believing in the God of the Bible and we start

making God in our own image – we reinvent God how we think he should be.

The second option is to love and pray for those we care about as if their lives depend on it – because they do.

The Pharisees refuse to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, and as a result will be excluded from God's presence. Conversely, Jesus tells his disciples that by believing in him, by trusting him even when it seems to them that everything has fallen apart, they will be with him in the end.

Brothers and sisters, it is no different for us. We must all make up our minds about Jesus. We must decide what we think about him, and there are profound consequences for that decision. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis famously sums it up like this:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to… Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.

As we look around the world, or just the barren landscape of our own lives, our hearts may be troubled. Jesus is calling us now as he called his disciples to believe in him, to trust him, even in the midst of uncertainty and confusion and seeming

hopelessness. We cannot see the path ahead, but he can. The problems of this life can often seem overwhelming and insurmountable to us, but they're not to him.

And we know something that the 11 men sitting around that table did not – that what lies ahead for we who place our trust in Jesus is our own resurrection, our own triumph over sorrow and pain and death.

Only Jesus has conquered death. If he hasn't, then the whole thing is a fraud and the world should pity us because we are wasting our lives on a lie. But if he has – if he has, then that changes everything. That changes history.

And so if Jesus is the only person to have risen from the dead never to die again – if that is true – then of course he is the only hope we have of doing the same. It's only by following him and trusting in the power of the same God who raised him from the dead that we have hope of being raised ourselves.

If you haven't yet put your trust in Jesus, I want to encourage you to do that. Examine the evidence. And if you have put your trust in Jesus, then take encouragement that even though life can be bewildering and confusing, our future is assured. We do not hope in this life only.

The bread and the wine that we're about to share commemorate that meal in the upper room where Jesus said these famous words. They remind us of his sacrifice for us, and the fact that although he has gone to be with his Father, he is preparing a place there for all those who put their trust in him. Whenever he do this, he proclaim his death until he comes again to take us to be with him.