

King's College Chapel Sermon, Sunday 22 November 2015

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It is too early to know how the year 2015 will be remembered. But we can be certain that when at the end of December the year is reviewed the phrase 'Je suis' will feature prominently.

It was shortly after the shootings in France on January 7th that Joachim Roncin tweeted 'Je suis Charlie'. Within hours the hashtag was trending on Twitter, providing in 13 characters a means whereby people could identify themselves with those who had been so callously killed. In a few days the phrase had been tweeted millions of times. The day after the attack in January it was being tweeted 6,400 times every minute.

In recent days the slogan has re-emerged. 'Je Suis Paris' people declare about themselves, expressing compassion and solidarity with the victims, and defiance against the forces of hatred and violence.

The phrase is highly adaptable; 'Je suis Diesel' or 'Je suis chien' being very specific recent uses. And it does of course have a history, especially if you move away from the specifically French form. It was JFK who with similar grammar identified himself with the people of Berlin in 1963.

Wikipedia, my source of some of the facts I have so far shared with you, does not go any further back with the phrase. But talking about it in Chapel we can and should delve much deeper into the history of 'I am-ing'. Indeed we can go back as far as the burning bush that Moses turned aside to contemplate. When he absorbed the fact that this was a mysteriously strange sight he took off his shoes and heard the voice that said, 'I am who I am'. The phrase is as enigmatic and awesome as the burning bush that was not consumed. Yet scholars tell us that the first translators of the Bible into English were not really sensitive enough to questions of tense. The Hebrew is better rendered, 'I shall be what I shall be'.

Nonetheless it is the 'I am' phrase that sticks in the mind and resonates down the centuries as something signifying divinity. This is why the phrase was sometimes found on the lips of Jesus. He once managed to turn a particularly difficult conversation into a dangerous one with the punchline, 'Before Abraham was, I am'. Most of Jesus' 'I am' sayings come from John's gospel where he says: 'I am the bread of life', 'I am the good shepherd', 'I am the resurrection', 'I am the light of the world' and 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. And those who sang the passion according to St John in Latin on Wednesday evening may recall the phrase 'ego sum' being repeated three times by Jesus when a band of soldiers and the servants of the high priests came to arrest him.

Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus replied, 'I am he.' Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, 'I am he', they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus answered, 'I told you that I am he'.
(John 18.4-8)

Those who are quick-witted will have noticed that when the gang that has come to get Jesus hear the phrase 'I am he' or 'ego sum' they step back and fall to the ground, just as Moses took off his shoes and covered his face before the burning bush. Such is the power of genuine 'I-ness'. Such is the power of personal identity when it reflects the reality of God.

The point of the *Je Suis* slogan today is solidarity with the suffering of victims of violence. As such it is a form of both compassion and defiance. My suggestion to you is that these three ingredients, compassion, solidarity and defiance, as well as being bold features of a new secular sensibility, are core values in the faith tradition that we follow and represent in this Chapel. They go back all the way to Jesus in the garden with the band sent to arrest him, and beat him up, and see to it that he is murdered; and they go all the way back beyond that to the voice from the burning bush that said, 'I shall be what I shall be' to the oppressed slave Moses.

The phrase 'I am' signifies divinity in our tradition. And that hint of the future tense; that note of *becoming* that sounds through the sense of pure being, is a vital aspect of the way in which religious or spiritual people should think not only about God's identity, but also their own identity. The question is not only 'who am I?' but, 'what shall I be?', 'what am I becoming?'

And not only individuals, but also institutions, nation and cultures should think about this question of becoming. Answering it requires of us some serious spiritual work. For our task is not so much to find a hashtag to tweet, as to know what values and what sense of purpose, lie deepest in our hearts, and to find ways of living that give them fullest expression over the days, weeks, months and years that lie ahead of us. And as we now know, we must do this in the context of a world that looks and feels increasingly precarious and dangerous; a world where we should and do expect more tragedies to unfold in unexpected places, creating more and more innocent victims whose plight will properly move us to compassion and solidarity and defiance again and again.

The challenge we all face as 2015 comes to its final weeks is how to become the person we need to be to ensure that the things closest to our heart, the values we believe to be most spiritually profound, are those that turn the tide of history, local and global, for the better; for we can be sure that people of evil and malicious intent are doing their damndest to take things in a very different direction.

And so it is right that we should, as Anglicans have always done at this point in the year, pray, 'Stir up, we beseech Thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people ...' For if God's faithful people are not stirred by the events of 2015 one must assume that they – that *we* – are past caring, past solidarity with victims, past defiance of the forces and means of evil.

But that is not an option for those who would say, 'I am Christian'.

Let us then pray for the courage to say 'I am' in full cognisance both of the political realities of our day and the faith in our hearts. Let us say 'I am' – and commit ourselves to compassion for the suffering, solidarity with victims and defiance of those who would make us act out of fear and hate rather than grace and hope.

Let us say 'I am' as we stand in solidarity with recent victims, and with Jesus Christ our Lord.