

### ***Who's Who***

In the name of the God of the living, dear friends in Christ: I wonder, how many of you are familiar with a publication called *Who's Who in America*? In it you'll find short biographies of those who are alleged to be our nation's leading and most notable citizens: doctors, lawyers, civic leaders, college professors, authors, entertainers, politicians, and so on. They publish a new, updated edition every other year. The idea is that if your name shows up in *Who's Who*, then you're somebody successful and semi-famous; and if not, well, then not so much: you're still one of the nameless, faceless mass of Americans whom no one has ever heard of nor should they be bothered. That's the way they promote it, anyway.

Turns out that it's something of a scam. The biographies that appear in *Who's Who* are mostly self-submitted. And there is no vetting process by the publisher to determine whether someone is worthy of having their name appear, nor is any effort taken to verify the accuracy of the articles that are submitted. Send in something about yourself, and they'll gladly put it in there. The assumption being that you will buy a copy of the book to prove to yourself and to the rest of your fellow citizens that you *are* somebody important. So, the vast majority of the names that appear in *Who's Who* are really just insignificant people who want to convince themselves and others that they are significant. But the publisher cashes in by selling them at least one copy of the book every two years; and even more to those who buy copies to give to their family and friends. Adding insult to injury, the publisher also makes money by selling the list of names and addresses of those in *Who's Who* to all the outfits that fill your mailbox with catalogs, advertisements, and appeals for charitable donations. I guess if you're someone important, they figure you can afford it.

(And now, too late, it dawns on me that before mentioning any of this, I probably should have looked through a recent edition of *Who's Who* to make sure that none of *your* names appear. My mostly sincere apologies to anyone I've offended.)

Okay, I bring this up as a lead in to today's Old Testament lesson. There we have the Lord's calling of Moses to be the deliverer of his people Israel from their cruel bondage in Egypt. Now, Moses: there's a name that would appear near the top of any list of *Who's Who* in the Bible – and first if you limited the search to the Old Testament. Moses is *the* man: the deliverer, the leader, the Law-giver, the writer of the first five books of the Bible, and the one to whom everyone else always refers when a question of authority comes up – like Jesus does in today's Gospel. In the New Testament period, the name of Moses is synonymous with God's revelation to mankind. Short of the Lord Jesus himself, no one in the biblical story of our salvation is more significant than Moses.

And that's ironic, because as we heard, when the Lord tells Moses what he's sending him to do, he replies "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" He means, why are you telling *me* to do this? I'm nobody. I'm insignificant. And I'm certainly not qualified for the job. In the ensuing conversation, most of which is not included in the reading we heard, Moses will go on to give excuse after excuse as to why he should not be the Lord's man for the job. Moses most emphatically did not want to be listed in the Bible's edition of *Who's Who*.

The thing is, the Lord isn't taking his "no" for an answer. To begin with, it's simply not accurate for Moses to say that he doesn't have any qualifications for the job the Lord is sending him to do. Even from his birth, he was marked as a special child, which is what moved his parents to keep him hidden so that he would not be slaughtered with the rest of the Hebrew infant males. Then there was his near miraculous adoption by the Pharaoh's daughter that allowed him to be raised and live as a prince of Egypt for forty years. No other Hebrew would have a fraction of Moses' knowledge about the workings of the Egyptian royal court – a valuable tool to have when dealing with the Pharaoh and his officials. Moses spent the next forty years herding sheep in the arid regions of Sinai and Midian in western Arabia, which is pretty much what the Lord knows he'll be doing for the next forty years of his life; the difference being that instead of dumb sheep he'll be shepherding a much larger flock of constantly griping, hard-headed people – the latter task being more difficult and frustrating by far. In all this we can see that the Lord has been carefully grooming Moses for the task that he's now calling him to do.

But that's beside the point. When Moses asks, "Who am *I*?" to do this thing, the Lord replies, "*I* will go with you". In other words, this isn't about who *you* are; it's about who *I* am. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. I've seen the affliction of my people, I've heard their cries, I know their suffering, and *I* have come down to deliver them. *I* will be doing all the heavy lifting. You, Moses, I'm sending as my agent. So get going. Scoot your fanny down the trail back to Egypt and tell my people that *I* sent you to them.

Of course, that's not good enough for Moses. He really doesn't want to do this, and he's going to try every excuse he can think of to get out of it. But it's interesting to note where he goes next in his effort to avoid the task. "Who am I ...?" didn't work out very well. So, his next question is, "Well, who are you?" Moses knows the gods of Egypt all have names. There's Ra and Isis and Osiris and countless others. So he asks, "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?"

The Lord replies, "*I am*, that's who *I am*. Tell them '*I am* has sent me to you'." There's a whole lot going on in that answer. On the most basic level, we assign names as labels to distinguish one person from another. It's the only way to know who we're talking about because there're a lot of other persons out there. In the Lord God's case, there isn't any distinction to be made. He's the only true God there is. Therefore he doesn't need a proper noun as a name. So instead he gives as his name a verb: the first person singular of the "to be" verb in the imperfect tense, to be precise; the imperfect tense denoting ongoing action in the past, present, or future. That is to say, "I always was, I always am, and I always will be".

But there's more to it than that. In giving his name as "I am", the Lord is revealing that he is the self-existent One. He truly *is*. He is dependent on nothing. Everything else in all the cosmos exists because of him. Everything else depends on him for its existence. What is made can be unmade; but the Lord God alone cannot *not* exist.

Taking this a step further, we know from the creation account that all things that depend on the Lord for their existence, owe their existence specifically to his Word. He spoke all things into being. That's where the Lord locates his creative, sustaining, and redemptive power: in his Word. Thus it is when he sends Moses to Egypt to take on the Pharaoh and all his forces, he doesn't endow him with super powers. No, he simply says, "Go and say this". The Lord gives Moses the Words he wants spoken. You go and speak; I'll take care of the rest. I will deliver my people from their afflictions.

The implications for the Church and specifically for how we understand the pastoral ministry should be clear, for this is how the Lord rescues his people even today. He sends men, insignificant men, to speak his Word. That's it. I could ask, who am I that I should baptize, forgive sins, preach, teach, and consecrate and distribute Christ's precious body and blood? The answer is I'm nobody; but God is with me and working through me by his Word. And when I'm gone, he'll call and send some other nobody to do the same thing. And through that nobody's ministry, he'll continue to save his people from the bondage of sin and death. The only Who who matters is the Lord.

But I'd like to return to the Lord's name "I am" in order to highlight that it is specifically in the context of salvation that the Lord reveals it. Prior to the call of Moses, the Lord is known by his people as "El Shaddai" which is Hebrew for "God Almighty". But now, when he says, "I have come down to rescue my people" he gives his personal name "I am". "This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations."

This is important because of how it plays out later in the biblical storyline of our salvation. We understand that the Lord's deliverance of Israel from their slavery in Egypt through the agency of Moses is a prophetic picture and foreshadowing of the much greater deliverance the Lord would accomplish for his people by the person and work of Jesus Christ. That's when the Lord really came down to save us through a man whom God was not only with, but actually the same person with. Jesus Christ, true God and true man. Jesus Christ, the "I am" in the flesh. So, it's no surprise that when the angel directs his earthly parents to give him a name, he is to be called "Jesus", for he will save his people from their sins; Jesus being translated "the I am saves".

And this is why we hear the name "I am" figuring so prominently in his ministry, as in "I am the Bread of Life come down from heaven". Moses gave the people manna in the wilderness, and they died; but "I am the living Bread ... If anyone eats of this Bread, he will live forever. And the Bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Or as in "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." And "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture." And "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." And "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." And finally "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." In each of these "I am" statements of Jesus, we hear him wedding his own divine name to his works of salvation on our behalf.

We hear it too in the garden when the soldiers come to arrest him. They say they are seeking Jesus of Nazareth. He steps forward and says, "I am." At the sound of him speaking the divine name, the soldiers are literally bowled over; such is the power it contains. Again he speaks, "I told you I am. Let these others go." And then he willingly submits to arrest while his disciples flee.

Later, at his trial, there's a lot of confusion among the witnesses. They can't seem to get their stories straight. Those who want to convict Jesus are becoming frustrated because they can't make a coherent case against him. At issue is just *who is* this man Jesus. Finally the high priest steps forward, places Jesus under oath, and asks, "Tell us once and for all, are you the

Christ, the Son of God?” Jesus replies, “I am”. And that is the crime they convict him of – of claiming the divine name as his own, which would indeed be damnable blasphemy if any one of us said it; but not for Jesus because he is who he claims to be. He proved it three days later when he rose from the dead having accomplished the work of our salvation that he was sent to do.

When sent to be a deliverer for God’s people, Moses asked, “Who am I?” When Jesus was sent, he answered, “I am”. And so he is and always will be our Creator, our Sustainer, and our Redeemer. To him be our thanks and praise forever. In his most holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***