

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	3 May 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Fifth Sunday of Easter
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Vanessa Baron, Treasurer

Look at the Piper Tapestry and you will see, at the bottom, an eagle - the symbol for the Gospel of John. Why is an eagle the symbol of the Evangelist? In the early Middle Ages, it was thought the eagle could fly towards and look directly into the sun. But it was also a bird that could see the smallest detail below as it fell to earth. John's Gospel does something similar; it soars to the heights as Jesus reveals and makes known the glory of God, but it is also a Gospel which depicts the struggles of human life – whether Martha's despair at the death of her brother or Peter's sorrow when Jesus persists in asking him, 'Do you love me?'. The heavenly and the earthly are connected as the Everlasting Word descends to 'becomes flesh' – and then as Jesus is lifted up on the Cross. Graham Sutherland captures this connection in his painting 'Noli me tangere' in the Mary Magdalene Chapel. There Jesus stands on a staircase, as he ascends to his Father – a staircase that connects earth and heaven.

Our Gospel passage today, the 5 Sunday of Easter, begins with the earthly – for the disciples are troubled – Jesus has just told them he is going away and where he is going, they cannot follow. It makes no sense to them. So they are sorrowful, bewildered, uncertain, confused and anxious during their last supper with Jesus. Jesus responds gently, "Do not let your hearts be troubled – you believe/trust in God, believe also in me."

Jesus goes on to use a famous illustration for where he is going and which also illumines our final destination. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling- places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?...and I will come again and will take you to myself." The old versions of the Bible, rather unhelpfully, say 'mansions' – making it sound as if heaven is full of National Trust stately homes! But Jesus was using a familiar image for his disciples. In the 1 Century there were 'mansiones' / 'motels' as it were, along major Roman roads, where people could break their journey and rest in safety. Servants would go ahead of a traveller to prepare a place for them.

Put simply, Jesus is saying that he is returning to the Father (14:12) and, at the end of our earthly journey, there will be a place prepared for each one of us, in his, in our Father's house. (It is deliberately a comforting image - in stark contrast to the fear and uncertainty in the Roman world about the afterlife, where a peaceful existence was not guaranteed. It is no accident that Christians coined a new term for burial places – changing the word from 'necropolis – city of the dead' to a 'cemetery – a sleeping place'.)

Thomas is the disciples' spokesman as he voices his confusion, "We do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Leading Jesus to proclaim, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

These are such familiar themes in John's Gospel - belief, truth, life. And the phrase, 'I am'. The Jewish leaders in John's Gospel regarded Jesus' use of this as blasphemous, as it was the meaning of Yahweh, the name of God himself. They rightly understood that by using it Jesus was laying claim to a unity with God the Father which no one else would dare to use.

So, what does Jesus mean when he says, "I am the Way?" Next Sunday afternoon will find me setting off on retreat. I am looking forward to it and, unusually, I am going to Herefordshire, not my

usual Norfolk. It's not a part of the country that I know well and so, of course, I have bought a map. I do not want to get lost! But looking at a map is not the same as getting there. A map may point out the way, but it is not the way itself. To find that, I need to get on the road myself and drive along it.

Similarly, Jesus did not say 'I reveal the Way' but 'I am the Way' – not so much a set of doctrines to be understood (although those are not be disregarded) as united with Jesus by our baptism, our trust and faith, our communion with him - we walk with him in the way of the Cross and the Resurrection.

'I am the Truth', says Jesus. In the Gospel of John, it is Satan who is 'the Father of lies', whose rule brings darkness and death. While Truth (that is genuine, authentic reality) is not simply an idea but a person - Jesus Christ, the embodied reality of God, who can be known, believed and trusted.

'I am the Life', says Jesus. 'In him was life' wrote St John in the prelude to the Gospel, 'and the life was the light of all people.' In the Gospel Jesus offers 'living water' to the woman at the well of Samaria. Those who hear and heed Christ's word pass from death to eternal life (5:24). He gives the 'bread of life' to those who will eat, while the good shepherd comes that the sheep might have life and have it abundantly. And to Martha, the sister of Lazarus, he proclaims, 'I am the resurrection and the life'

What Jesus offers to those who will follow him is an invitation to share in the life of God Himself; to be united by the Spirit within the loving relationship of the Trinity – to know life in 'all its fulness' and for all eternity. This is our Easter hope and the hope that will take us home.

The eagle is indeed a fitting symbol for the Gospel of John. It is almost a platitude to say that we live in a troubled, anxious world of pain and confusion – a world of fake news and little trust. In contrast

Jesus says, 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life'. There is no other way to the Father.

George Herbert wrote a much-loved poem entitled 'The Call', in which he personalised Jesus' three-fold claim. I end with the first verse, as a prayer.

*Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life;
Such a Way as gives us breath,
Such a Truth as ends all strife,
Such a Life as killeth death. Amen*