

*St Brandon's, Sermon for 22nd December 2019.*

*Matthew 1:18-end*

***Names***

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When I was at school – not so recently! - and learning French, one of the first things we were taught was to say our name – “j’m’appelle Alison.”

We advanced to enquiring what is your name? (That hasn’t stuck so well).

Its a first step in suggesting we might want to get to know someone.

Or get back to them to pick up a conversation – always a good plan to know who’s promised on the other end of the phone to sort something out.

Or to attribute information: so and so said it was like this.

Its one of the things we have to contend with as we grow old, that we forget first insignificant names: the names of flowers perhaps, and then important names, and, with a sense of dread: maybe even intimate names.

Names matter!

We received two Christmas cards this year with no signatures: I remembered who handed me one, the other came by post and remains a mystery. We’ve trawled it for clues: they obviously know several key bits of information about our family, and have bothered to write four lines of personal message but frustratingly, not enough to identify them.

People’s names unlock so many memories.

Once we have remembered someone’s name we can start to put them in a context: where and how we knew them, what they meant to us and what they mean to us now.

Whilst a photo can bring many memories, looking at a photo without being able to name the person leaves us feeling a lack, an incompleteness.

Names have always been important, as far as we can tell. Its remarkable how many names have been recorded in the Bible: it makes a link with concrete historical events, happening to real people; it nails it to a time and place. They are more than just names being recorded, they are being cited to record who witnessed, or under who's authority things happened: which King, or Secretary, or temple Priest.

And then comes a new story, a new beginning, a new God-event: the birth of Jesus.

The key characters are of no status in their own right:

Mary is just a young woman, albeit a young woman devoted to God, and she happens to be engaged to a carpenter, a righteous man of David's descent.

David is the important name in this. Joseph is the agent.

Three times in the seven verses of Matthew's gospel read today, there are references to the naming of Jesus.

The angel instructs Joseph in the dream "your are to name him Jesus".

The prophecy of Isaiah is recalled: "... they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us'."

And Joseph's obedient response is recorded: '... and he named him Jesus.'

Names are important. And just in case you think three times reiterating the naming of Jesus is merely part of the story-telling, this passage immediately follows the opening of Matthew's gospel with the names of every father and son – and the

occasional mother – from Abraham to David (fourteen generations), David to the deportation to Babylon (fourteen generations) and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah - another fourteen generations.

Its a hypnotic passage that firmly stitches the baby Jesus into the fabric of real history, and into the weaving of the scriptures, and into the flesh and bloodness of David.

The angel has come to announce to Joseph that Mary's child is from the Holy Spirit, that he will save his people from their sins. The angel is announcing the extraordinary news to Joseph in his dream, that his betrothed's baby is nothing less than the long-awaited Messiah, saviour of the world, for whom, as Jews, they have long watched and waited.

So its a bit Monty Pythonish that the angel should instruct them to call this special child by one of the commonest boy's names then in use amongst Jews: 'Jesus'.

It would to their ears have sounded very unremarkable.

(Contrast this with Zechariah and Elizabeth naming their son 'John', on angelic instructions, when the name 'John' didn't feature in their family.)

Was it the first clue that Jesus is to be both extraordinary and very ordinary?

Is it the first step in ensuring that Jesus can grow up in peaceful obscurity once the hubbub of his birth, recognition and escape from Herod, recognition and blessing by Simeon and Anna, have happened?

Is Jesus being protected with a very ordinary name so that he can grow up in a full and rounded human way, in family circumstances that are very typical, learning what it is to be a child of that society, and as an adult, witness to the lot of most

of humanity? Partaking in, emerging from, a place from where he could learn what it is to struggle to know how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

What it is to go hungry - or eat curds and honey.

What matters.

And where God is found in and amongst all that.

So good was the hiding in that ordinary name and life as son of Joseph the carpenter, that the inhabitants of his home town nearly stoned him when he had the courage and audacity to identify with the Messiah role when he read from the scroll in the temple, some thirty years later.

Jesus is recorded as being a common name amongst Jews before 70 AD. Presumably, by 70 AD, the name is so firmly associated with the central figure of Christianity that not many people would choose to use it.

And today?

Well, according to ‘my-name-stats.com’, Jesus is ranked as the 256th most popular given name in the United States. That’s a lot of names that are more popular! It means there are 82.03 people (don’t we love stats!) - 82.03 people named Jesus for every 100,000 Americans. Of these, 1.31% are using it as a girls name, and 0.26% as a surname.

At the risk of generalising, let’s say only a very small minority choose Jesus as the name for their baby.

Obviously.

Or is it obvious?

Why should such a well-known name not be used more – - unless it is that the name has huge significance, even where there is so much secularism, it is avoided.

Even the name has power.

The quote, “*At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow*”, comes to mind.

This is no ordinary baby that the angel says must be given the most common name of Jesus, it is a baby that will be commonly held Holy, who’s significance will spread far and wide around the globe.

In contrast to those who are re-named by God to fulfil their destiny: Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter, the rock, Jesus comes to fill and claim his name as his own.

As the realisation grew as to who Jesus was and is, so other titles were given to describe him, principally, Christ, meaning Messiah, connecting him to the aspirations and beliefs of the people of Israel. Apparently, there are forty-two names or titles of Jesus used in the New Testament: answers on the back of a large postcard!

A shorter list of some of those we are most familiar with might run something like this:

O Wisdom, Lord and Ruler, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Rising Sun, King of the Nations, Emmanuel: Come, Lord Jesus.

These are names to conjure with; to savour; to breathe, to pray. Reciting Jesus’ name is one of the most ancient of simple prayers, somehow drawing us deeper and closer to that which we are naming.

Going back to what I said at the beginning: our need is to know a name so as to place people, to identify them, to, above all, relate to them.

Little surprise then, that reciting his names is so effective as a prayer, opening our memories and senses to all we have learnt and know of God in us, and God with us; our hopes and longings; as he comes. Marantha: come Lord Jesus. *Amen*