

27 December 2020
Isaiah 61:10-62.3
Galatians 4:4-7
Luke 2:15-21

William Shakespeare, apparently didn't think that names should matter very much.

He had his character Juliet opine:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.

What's in a name?

Unlike Shakespeare perhaps, I think most of us tend to put great store in a name when we come to choosing one for a child, don't we? We think about what names mean. We think about people we want to honour. We avoid names that we associate with people or events we don't like. We listen to how the names sound, on their own or in combination. We think about how they might be abbreviated or turned into nicknames.

I remember how when we were expecting our second child, Christine and I faced a real dilemma. Before our first child was born we had decided on two pairs of names, Victoria Anne for a girl, and Antony Charles for a boy. Our firstborn was a girl and was duly named Victoria. As we looked forward to our second, those two pairs of names still seemed the only combinations we really liked, so we really struggled to come up with names we could use if our second child turned out to be a girl. We were saved by the fact that he turned out to be a boy, to whom we gratefully gave the name Antony.

We chose these pairs of names because we liked the sound of them, alone and in combination, and because the second name in each pair honoured someone important in our family line. We were a little taken aback when we discussed baptising Antony and our priest declared "Ah, yes. Antony Charles, after Antony of Padua and King Charles the Martyr"!

The names we choose, whatever our rationale, can have a lasting impact on our child and their sense of identity. Despite our best efforts, we can only hope that in time the names our children are given will become imbued with significance because

of *their own* personalities and qualities, and not lumbered with attributes that belong to someone else.

The naming of Jesus was rather special. We read in the gospel that he was given the name Jesus, the name the angel had assigned to him before he had been conceived. Back in Luke 1:31 the angel is recorded as saying to Mary, "You will be with child and will give birth to a son, and you will give him the name Jesus." And now it has come to pass.

It's a delightful story, and amazing too; but we might be inclined to ask "So what?"

So, let's look at the event itself. On the eighth day, Jesus was circumcised and named. This was in full accordance with God's covenant with Abraham, recorded in Genesis 17:

This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you will keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised...

Jesus was a descendant of Abraham, a Jewish boy through and through; he did what Jewish boys did. More importantly, he was through and through a human being: he grew, he cried; he was hungry, thirsty; he slept, was wearied and troubled; he was moved with compassion and zeal, he wept; he was insulted and mocked; he knew rejection, betrayal and abandonment; he was tried, tortured, whipped, nailed to the cross and died. He knows how we feel, because he has been there too.

Jesus' name was given, not by Mary and Joseph, not by grandparents or uncles and aunts, but by an angel. The fact that it was an angel that gave the name is one of the ways that God revealed that Jesus came from God, that he was fully divine as much as he was fully human.

While speaking at a political rally, Australian politician Robert Menzies was interrupted by a heckler who shouted, "I wouldn't vote for your if you were the

archangel Gabriel!” “If I were the archangel Gabriel,” answered Menzies, “you would scarcely be in my constituency.”¹

But Jesus was from that divine constituency.

The miracle of the incarnation is central to our faith. God has acted even to the extent of living and walking among us in the person of Jesus. And his purpose in doing so is signalled in the name the baby was given by the angel: Jesus. “Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Yeshua” (“Joshua”) which means “Yahweh is salvation” or “God saves”. Mary doesn’t get to give her son a name of her own choosing – a family name that might make him part of her history or Joseph’s – but a name that reflects a purpose and destiny that overarches all of that and everything else.

Talking of thoroughly Jewish boys, all through his childhood and early adulthood Paul would have believed that he was special, because of his relationship with God.² This relationship though was not anything he chose or opted in to, but was his right because he was a Jew by birth. He was one of God’s chosen people, an inheritor of the promises made to Abraham and to David, automatically ‘one of the family’.

But in encountering the risen Lord Jesus, and reflecting on all Jesus taught and stood for, Paul has had to reckon with his sense of identity. Once, Paul would have *assumed* that he was a child of God, and heir to God’s promises, simply because of who he was and where he was born. But now he accepts in gratitude from God’s hands what he once through was his by right. Yes, he says, we *are* children of God, but only because God chooses us, adopts us, and makes us his own. We do not have any automatic right to call God ‘Father’, but God the Holy Spirit, in his mercy, comes to us, and teaches how to be children of God. By ourselves, we do not even know the words that describe the relationship. Only God knows what this profound thing, this “sonship”, is and only he can teach us its words and its meaning. What Paul now preaches to the Gentiles is what he, a Jew, has learned himself, the hard

¹ Gyles Brandreth, *871 Famous Last Words*, New York: Bell, 1982 [First published in 1979 by Sterling as *The Last Word*]. p.96

² The following largely quotes Williams, pp. 14-15, with some variation and reworking.

way: you *can* be the child of God, but only if you accept it in gratitude from God's own hand. If, like Pauls' compatriots, you think you already are a child of God, or that you don't need any teaching about how to be a child of God, or that God is bound to choose you as his child and reject others, then you have not begun to understand what only the Holy Spirit can teach.

Paul saw, in humility and joy, the huge shift that happens when God sends his only Son. Paul saw that all other relationships based on 'rights' have to be reworked, in the light of this relationship that we are offered, to which we respond in gratitude and obedience, or not at all.

Paul came from a people who already thought they were "in". But Paul had a deep concern for, and ministry to, those who were regarded as "out" – the Gentiles, the rest. Part of Paul's new understanding arising from the work of Jesus, is that God's saving work was for *all* – regardless of birth. It is God's gift to all who would receive it. All can become members of the family of God.

The gift of the Holy Spirit that enables us to cry 'Abba, Father' defines a new relationship and a new identity. Whatever defines us, whatever name we were given at birth or have been labelled with since or have taken on for ourselves, is now secondary to the greatest truth of all: that we are sons and daughters of the Most High God. In Isaiah, desolate Zion is gifted a new name as well as glorious new attributes:

You will be a crown of splendour in the Lord's hand,
a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

No longer will they call you Deserted,
or name your land Desolate.

But you will be called Hephzibah (which means *my delight is in her*)
and your land Beulah (which means *married*);
for the Lord will take delight in you,
and your land will be married.

Just as Zion is given a new identity through the saving work of God, so too we are given a new identity through the saving work of Jesus – Yeshua, "God saves". This is not a fragile identity, but an eternal one. With this self-understanding I need not be anxious. Who I am is not based on circumstances, and it doesn't fall apart

when I fail to achieve or when I make mistakes or when I can't cope or when people think less of me.

We read that after the shepherds departed, Mary treasured in her heart the events that had taken place and pondered over them.³

'Pondering' is a powerful word in the original Greek. It isn't just puzzled musing or focused daydreaming. It speaks rather of bringing together, or even throwing together, a collection of people, ideas or objects, and seeing what happens. Like the sages and visionaries of old, Mary guarded great and terrible secrets in her heart, turning them this way and that, letting them knock sparks off each other. God and the shepherds. Angels and straw. Grace and blood. Journeys and lodgings and babies and prayers. In and through them all, for her and for us, there weaves the story of God's unexpected love and power.

The story is not just of the one named "God saves". The story too is of us who, because God saves, are adopted into the family of God, able now to address God in a new way – "Abba, Father."

Now that's something to ponder over!

Sources:

- Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections: Year B*, London: SPCK, 2005
- Tom Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays: Year B*, London: SPCK, 2002

³ The following is from Wright, p. 13