

The Naming of Jesus, 1st January 2023

According to the Gospel of S Luke chapter 2 verse 21, which we heard read; “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

The eighth day after the birth of Jesus is traditionally observed on the 1st of January. To keep Jewish law males should be circumcised eight days after birth during a *Brit milah* ceremony, at which they are also given their name.

So today we celebrate the giving of the name Jesus to the baby born eight days earlier. Jesus is a given name derived from Ἰησοῦς the Ancient Greek form of the Hebrew and Aramaic name Yeshua. It is etymologically related to another biblical name, Joshua. In the Hebrew scriptures there is great importance placed on the name. You will remember when God told Moses to go to the Egyptian Pharoah and tell him to let the Hebrews, then enslaved, go free he responded to God by asking “Whom shall I say sent me?” God declared his name to Moses – *Ehyeh, asher, ehyeh* – meaning ‘I am who I am’.

We can say that unless we know the name of a person we cannot have any sort of relationship with that person. Once we have a name by which to call someone we move into relationship. In learning the name of the baby born eight days earlier the way was opened for the events God planned before the beginning of time to unfold.

We celebrated that birth last Sunday at Christmas. We have, for the most part, known what went on through that eventful night when Jesus was born. Let us for a moment think again about that night.

I suppose there is one word that best describes that night on which Jesus was born – ordinary. The sky was ordinary. The sheep were ordinary too. They were simply sheep – sleeping silhouettes on a hillside. And the shepherds? They were ordinary peasants. They were probably wearing all the clothes they owned. If you got up close you would have found that they were smelling like sheep and looking just as woolly. They were conscientious, and hardy as well, to spend every night outside guarding their flocks. You won’t find their shepherd’s crooks in a museum. You won’t find their writings in a library. No one asked for their opinion on social justice or the meaning of the Torah. They were anonymous, simple, ordinary people.

So we have an ordinary night with ordinary sheep and ordinary shepherds. And were it not for the God who delights in transforming the ordinary, the night would have gone unnoticed and unrecorded. The sheep would have been forgotten, the shepherds would have slept the night away.

But God intervened and the night was ordinary no more. The angels came in the night because that is when light is best seen and when light is most needed. God transforms the ordinary for the same reason. That's also probably why the announcement came first to the shepherds.

They didn't ask God if he was sure he knew what he was doing. Had the angel gone to the theologians, they would have first consulted their commentaries. Had he gone to the politicians, they would have looked around to see if anyone was watching, or in New Zealand would have set up a review panel. Had he gone to the influential they would have checked their diaries. So, he went to the shepherds. People whose testimony did not count in a law court. People who didn't have a reputation to protect, or an axe to grind, or a ladder to climb.

As we reflect on that ordinary night that was ordinary no more, to the extent that so many centuries later we still remember it every year, there are two words which could focus our thoughts. The words are searched and shared.

In the Gospel we heard read we find in verses 15 and 16, "the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby."

The shepherds went looking for Jesus, in the dark, leaving their flocks behind. The word 'found' in verse 16 means 'found after a search'. It must have taken some considerable time to find Mary and Joseph and the baby. They searched until they found Jesus. They heard the Word of God and they responded. They wanted to see whether what they had been told was true. It took time and effort to find Jesus, but I am sure they would have said it was worth it. In this respect, the shepherds can be seen as role models. Let me ask you, have you searched for Jesus – personally? How desperate are you to find him, know him, to be with him?

In S Luke 2:17 and 18 we find, "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."

You might remember that a little earlier I said that the shepherds could not give evidence in court. That was probably because they had no fixed address, like Bedouin today. Isn't it ironic that God chose those shepherds to be the first human witnesses to tell others that prophecy had been fulfilled, that angels had appeared and that the Messiah had been born. You might remember a similar irony when, after the crucifixion the news of the resurrection had to be shared; God chose women as the first witnesses – they also could not be witnesses in court.

People were amazed at what the shepherds shared. Those shepherds didn't need to go on an evangelism course first. Their testimony was spontaneous. The shepherds spoke from the heart and their words connected with the deepest needs of others. When you hear exciting news, it's hard not to share it. You don't think about yourself or the words to say – you are simply consumed by the good news and you can't keep it in. When a baby is born in the family, you can't stop talking about your child or grandchild, you can't resist pulling out the photos. It brings a smile to your face, a skip to your walk, and you find yourself sharing with anyone, even strangers, who will listen. The more exciting, the more amazing the news, the greater the eagerness to share.

The gospel is the greatest news on earth. If we feel reluctant or embarrassed to share it, perhaps we have not really understood what Jesus has done for us. The more time we spend with Jesus the more infectious we become. We are his witnesses today.

Maybe you feel rather ordinary yourself today. Behind the festivities grounded in that far off event maybe you secretly feel rather self-conscious, insecure, unsure how you would respond to such a visitation from angels. That is the point at which we should remember God delights in the ordinary.

Today, a small unassuming church building marks the birthplace of Jesus in Bethlehem. Underneath the altar is a cave, a little cavern lit by silver lamps. Crusader crosses are etched into the marble pillars, witness to countless generations of pilgrims. Unlike many of our Cathedrals, you can freely enter the building and admire this ancient church. You can even step down into the quiet cave where a star embedded in the floor denotes the place where the Saviour of the world was probably born. King Charles referred to this spot in his first Christmas speech.

Any may enter the cave but there is one condition, one requirement, one stipulation. You have to stoop. The entrance to the cave is so low only a child can enter standing up. A most profound parable.

To view the place where Christ was born, we must humble ourselves. We must bow to enter the special place. Where we are now we should join with the countless crowds who through the years have sung 'O come let us adore him'.

In order to do that we do not need to travel to the Holy Land. We can adore the new born child here where we are, gathered in his name. The wonder of it is that Jesus has promised to be with us as we do that. He is here with us and we can adore Jesus, God with us, Emanuel.