

Sermon 31.12.2023 The Naming of Jesus. 1st of Christmas
“And he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel”

When a baby is born the new parents probably feel that this new child has become the property of the entire world. Everyone wants to know: Was it an easy birth? Was the father there? How much did it weigh? What's its name?

I tried not to rush James and Meghan when I first saw their new baby son, Eloise's new brother, but fairly soon the question came. What are you going to call him? He's going to be called Jack. Jack is his name.

James held it together, but for about a week after my older son Richard was born I couldn't say his name without bursting into tears. I don't know why, but there was a lot of embarrassed blowing into handkerchiefs to disguise my emotion after he had come into the world. Just the mention of his name made me all teary.

And as for my daughter; we called her Deborah. That was the name we chose, but she had other ideas about her name. She hates with a passion being called Debbie. She loves being called Debs, that's the name on most of her official documents. She went through a stage of wanting to be called Lucy, and we only ever called her Deborah when she was naughty.

Our names are important to us. It is what summarises our identity.

In this church if I call out 'Fr Wayne' only one person turns round. However, if I call out 'Chris' several people will turn round, and most of you will say 'She's just here' or 'He's over there' because you know a Chris.

We love it when someone remembers our name. We get annoyed when people get our name wrong.

And if we look at the early stories of our faith it is clear that people haven't changed much in 4,000 years. From the earliest stories in Genesis names have been significant and important.

The birth of Jesus, which we have just celebrated, is preceded 6 months or so by the birth of our patron Saint, John the Baptist. There was some argument after John's birth as to which relative he might be named after until his Dad made it unequivocally clear that he would be named John. 'His name is John'. And he writes it down to make it clear. John is his name.

And as we celebrated last week, even before he was born, the angel had told Mary that her boy was to be called Jesus. And I guess she told Joseph that the name had already been given. He will be called Jesus.

The name is chosen, the name is given and it becomes the way we identify the whole person, their physical characteristics, their personality, their whole being.

I want you, for a moment to stop thinking about other people's names, and to bring your own name into the front of your mind. How do you feel about it? Are you like my daughter, happy to take on a contraction of your given name? Have you changed your given name and taken on a name that you feel better fits who you are? Do you love your name and can't think of being known by any other name?

Over the last couple of years you have gotten to know me, and well enough I hope to be able to forgive me when occasionally I say 'I'm really sorry. This is really rude, but I can't remember your name'. And because we are such a diverse family of people here, from almost every corner of the world, I know I make a complete mess of your names sometimes. We have a fine young man in this congregation who I call George, but whose name is pronounced in a much more refined, Ukrainian way. There is a young lady who comes to the Wednesday eucharist who is very open to the fact that native English tongues can't pronounce with any accuracy her Chinese name, and so she introduces herself as Yun. Fortunately some people who come from exotic places like Kerala in Southern India proudly bear the named Kenneth.

Today I have made you think about names and your name in particular because today we mark the naming of Jesus. An event which down the centuries has been recognised by the church as being significant. The name was given to Mary by God through the words of an angel. The name 'Jesus' carried a divine seal of appointment and approval for this baby boy.

I want you to go home knowing that your name is significant to God because you are important to God.

As the Old Testament readings we heard over Christmas reminded us Christians soon came to believe that what the prophets of old had been talking about in the past found a fulfilment in Jesus. Well, those old prophets have something to say about you too. Yes, you!

Listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah and he will remind you how much you are loved by God, how important you are to God.

Through Isaiah God says to his people : I have called you by name – you are mine.

As we stand on the edge of a new year, as we face a future which is unknown and uncertain God says to his people:

I have called you by name. When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you. (Isaiah 43:2)

And it gets better! Six chapters on Isaiah records God saying to his people: I can never forget you! I have written your name on the palms of my hands. (Isaiah 49:16) I have written your name on the palms of my hands.

As we go into 2024 you need to hear this. There will be not be a moment when God says, 'I'm really sorry. This is really rude, but I can't remember your name'.

This does not mean that there will not be problems, difficulties, darkness and moments of despair for some of us, alongside all the new opportunities, thrills and joys that a new year will bring, but God says 'I have called you by name, I can never forget you, I have written your name on the palm of my hand.'

Today we mark the day 2,000 years ago when Jesus was named. They gave him the name Jesus as the angel had instructed. When you celebrate the day of your birth, your naming, in 2024, be it your first birthday or your hundredth, remember that God the Father has your name written on the palms of his hands. We are known by name, loved and strengthened for whatever the year may bring. AMEN