

8am HTW - Naming and Circumcision of Jesus

May the words on my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

I wonder how many of you like to be known by the name your parents gave you? A surprising number of people choose to be known by some alternative name, perhaps a derivative of their proper name, or by a middle name, or nickname. Often what is underneath the change is a feeling that the name given them does not really reflect **who they are**.

What's in a name? Well many things. That sense of **identity** just described, the feeling that our name reflects who we are. Many women these days find it difficult to change their surname when they marry, or prefer to make a distinction between their working life, labelled by their maiden name, and their family life, labelled by their married name. A great deal is in a name. Our readings this morning show us that for a Jewish family in the time of Jesus, and before him, even **more than personal identity** was carried by one's name.

Having a name carries with it a sense of being **known and loved**. Those without a name, in a metaphorical sense if not a literal one, can often feel they have no identity. The homeless on our streets like to be addressed by name, so that their humanity and their individuality is recognised, rather than their status. Children who are simply summoned by 'Hey! You! Come 'ere!' can feel utterly

humiliated and unloved, even if the address is kindly meant. Conversely, those who know they are loved, whether adult or child, long to hear their name repeated by the one who loves them. And we often invent a pet name for someone much loved, don't we?

We learn from the Bible that for the ancient **Jews** a name could carry even **more than personal identity**. There are significant **changes of name** made by God for a few individuals: Abram, who is old and without issue, becomes Abraham indicating that God will make him the father of the nations (Genesis 17:1 - 5). Sarai his wife becomes Sarah (meaning Mother of the nations), (see verses 15 - 16) and later their grandson Jacob is renamed Israel, meaning 'someone who prevails with the Eternal (see Genesis 32:24 - 28). In each case the **change of name** brings with it **significant** change for the person: a change of **identity** yes, but also a change of **role** in the history of salvation. Most importantly it marks a change in **relationship with God**. It marks a new start. It marks a new **covenant** between God and man.

We see something similar today when men or women enter a religious order and take on a new name. I still remember my confusion when a member of staff at school, formerly known as Miss Lloyd, donned a nun's habit and had to be called Sr John Bosco (all the more confusing because it was a man's name). But that change of name was the beginning of a new existence for her, a new relationship between her and God. It was a **sign of a new covenant** between them, of mutual promise and commitment, that each would care for the other.

So a name can carry a sense of identity, of being known and loved, even **blessed**, as we heard in our reading from Numbers this morning. As God speaks to Moses he says that Aaron and his sons, the priestly tribe amongst the Israelites, are to bless the Israelites, as a priest should. But as they do so, they are to put the **Lord's name on them**, marking them out as God's chosen people. This is a sign of **covenant**. Even more, that name can also indicate a **particular role** that the individual renamed is to play in the history of salvation.

In our Gospel reading this morning we pick up the familiar Christmas story and then go a few days beyond it to the time when the child was to be circumcised, and named. **Circumcision** is of course a mark of being Jewish for a male child, again a **sign of covenant** between God and man. It stems from that passage in Genesis where we read: *⁹God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹²Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old.* (Genesis 17:9-14).

And so the Holy Family, faithful Jews that they are, take their newborn son to be circumcised and named on the eighth day. But this ritual is not so much a **mark** of race as of being chosen. It is a sign of **covenant** between God and his chosen people, as we have seen, a sign of being known, loved, and blessed by God.

And with the circumcision, comes the naming of Jesus. Just as with those individuals before him, Abraham and Sarah, and Jacob, God himself, through the angel Gabriel, decrees the name of the heavenly babe. This decree already alerts us to the importance of this new born babe. And as with his Jewish forerunners the change of name is significant because it is a sign of new covenant between God and man and of an individual who has a significant part to play in the history of salvation.

The babe was to be called Jesus. And what does that name mean? It means **Saviour**. Jesus is **named by his Father**, and with that name comes identity, and role, and destiny for him. Jesus is chosen for special naming not just because he is beloved of God, but because God has a particular role for him to play in the history of salvation. For us, that name indicates not only who Jesus truly is, but gives us a sign that God has entered into a **new covenant** with mankind. That Name above all names is a sign of peace, of reconciliation, and new hope.

As the angels sang, this covenant is between God and **all mankind**, a sign of goodwill towards all men. As Paul explains in his letter to the Galatians that we heard earlier, through this Jesus, this Saviour, we will **all** be able to call God 'Abba, Father'. There is no need for us to be marked out by circumcision as God's chosen ones, for **in Jesus Christ** we are all chosen by God. Through his death and resurrection, we need no longer be slaves to sin, but can be **children** of God, and **heirs** to the promise made to the Jewish Abraham and his seed for ever. We will all share in the blessing of the covenant between God and his chosen people because we are **all named 'children of God'**.