

Date 01/01/2023

Day: The Naming of Jesus Year A

Congregation: St Chad's, Linwood

First Reading: Numbers 6: 22-27

Second Reading: Philippians 2: 5-13

Gospel: Luke 2: 15-21

Choosing the name of a baby is both exciting and daunting at the same time. Parents-to-be have to narrow down to one the many names that they have thought over the years that would be lovely for any child they might have. It has to be one that both agree on; there needs to be consideration as to what the initials spell; it might be a family favourite name that is handed down over the generations or it might be one of someone much admired; and it must be tried out to make sure that it will sound good when read out by newsreaders when the child turns out to be famous.

There is so much to consider! And that is before others get to have their say on the matter once the child is presented to the world with the name that will accompany it through life.

There was no such dilemma with the naming of Jesus, because his name had been given to Mary on the night she was told she was

going to bear Jesus. Because the naming of Jesus is a small part of the overall story of the Nativity, taking only one verse to describe it, we might think that it is not important. It seems like a brief addition to the story of the birth of Jesus, coming as it does after the story of the visit by the shepherds.

It is linked with the traditional circumcision that was required for Jewish males. As part of that ceremony the child is named. When the Rabbi said to Mary and Joseph 'Name this child' they replied 'Jesus'. And, in doing so, they took the next step in their obedience to God, naming the baby as instructed by the angel.

Within the name is Jesus' vocation, his relationship to humanity, and the outcome of the desire of God to be close to us. The name "Jesus" says that God cares about us; God knows what is happening to and with us; God is not indifferent; God is present, acting in the world and in our lives; and that God loves us.

Brief though the mention of it might be, the name given to Jesus was of great importance. He is the promised Messiah long awaited

by the Israelites and his name will give an indication of his status and his mission. 'Jesus' comes from the Hebrew 'Yeshua' via the Greek 'Iesous' and means 'God saves'. That in itself is a clear indication of what he has come from God to do. But it is also reinforced by all the other names for Jesus that we find in the scriptures.

I did think of offering a reward for each name you could come up with, but decided that might take too much time so instead you will see some of the names on the Power Point. Perhaps, like me, when you hear those names which have been used in hymns you hear the tune to which we sing them. For me that is especially so with the music from the oratorio 'Messiah' (in itself another name that we give to Jesus); when I read the words 'Wonderful, Counsellor, Almighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' I hear in my mind the stirring chorus 'For unto us a child is born' which lists all of those names.

All of these names – and any others you might come up with – are all descriptors of what Jesus did (and will do) for those who seek

him out. Each indicates a separate trait or personality that Jesus will be for people, indicating that he is the one for all people. To those used to a monarchy he is the King of Kings; to those weighed down by their sense of having done wrong he is Redeemer or Saviour; to those livelihood is to care for sheep he is the Good Shepherd; to those who are aware of having taken the wrong path in life he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Each name is another way of understanding and experiencing God through Jesus and we are able to identify with different names at different times according to what is happening in our lives.

Jesus was the incarnation of God, the living expression of God among us, God come to earth as the Messiah who had been promised for many generations. One of the principles of Judaism is that they cannot speak the name of God as it is too sacred to be spoken aloud or written down by humans. Early in the Old Testament we hear Moses told, when he encountered God in the burning bush, that he is to tell the Israelites that 'I AM' has commissioned him to lead them out of slavery to the Egyptians. That translates from Yahweh which, on the occasions it is written

down, is done with an asterisk replacing the vowels. And this was the situation until Jesus was born, that God was considered so far away from people that God's name could not even be spoken.

How things changed with Jesus then! Not only is God now able to be seen in Jesus, but his name is able to be spoken, both tremendous steps forward in people's relationship with God. God can now be seen, be named, and be spoken about. God is among us, living with us, no longer a distant, formidable God, but one that shares our life, our joys, our pain, and who loves us unconditionally.

What does that mean for us, who recognise the name 'Jesus' and many of the alternative names by which he is called? Do we, like the shepherds, return to our post-Christmas, New Year lives glorifying and praising God for all we have seen and heard? The shepherds did not keep the name of Jesus to themselves, but were excited to share that this baby, with the name that means 'God saves' had been born and his life held so much promise for so many people.

When do we say that name? Where? How often? Under what circumstances? In whose company? Is it only a name we read in the Bible? A name we speak only in church? Is it a name that we have used for the wrong purpose? Do we use it in our prayer?

We, too, are called to proclaim the holy name of Jesus in word and deed, until he comes again. The good news inherent in Jesus' holy name, that 'God saves,' is desperately needed in our broken world today. May we, like the shepherds, have the courage and integrity to pass on the good news in all its richness and simplicity to anyone God places in our paths.

As a parish we carry out a lot of outreach work among our community, driven by the gospel imperative to care for all those in need. This year, as part of our desire to grow our parish, I suggest that we need also to make the reason behind our caring work to be known – to help people understand that we do it because we have heard and we honour the name of Jesus and want others to know his name also. This is the way in which we will make disciples, as we witness to what that name means to us who experience continually that 'God saves'.