

## **New Names and the New Year**

*Feast of The Naming and Circumcision of Jesus, 1<sup>st</sup> January 2017*

Well, congratulations on making it to church the morning after your New Year's Eve celebrations. Celebrations no doubt tinged with a sense of unease – such huge uncertainties hanging over the future... So what on earth has the naming of Jesus got to do with the world as it is this New Year's Day?

Let alone, why on earth do we need to know about his circumcision? That's simple: to the Jews it was (and is) a vital sign of identity, and the Gospel mentions it to show that Jesus was not rejecting the rich heritage of his own people – he was part of it, even though he would seek later to fulfil that heritage in un-thought-of and radical ways.

The naming was even more significant: Luke's and Matthew's nativity accounts, for all their differences, agree that the name 'Jesus' was commanded by an angel before his conception. And names throughout Scripture are full of meaning, reflecting the person's character, or the circumstances of their birth; they may be given a new name during their lifetime. Abraham was originally called Abram – honoured father – a spelling that often tricks unwary lesson readers. He was *re-named* Abraham – father of a multitude – by God, in token of the promise of descendants, through a son for this aged couple. The son was named Isaac – laughter – after the surprised joy of his unlikely birth, and maybe also the embarrassing time when Sarah overheard God's promise and laughed aloud at the absurdity of conceiving in her eighties.

A generation on, Jacob's name reflects the tricks he played on his brother, right from his birth, grabbing his twin's heel, trying not to be left as the second son; and later, tricking poor, blundering Esau out of his birthright, and then out of his father's blessing. Later he was re-named Israel – Ishra-el – 'he strove with God' – after his night of wrestling with the mysterious presence. And Moses, his name was given him by Pharaoh's daughter, commemorating his rescue from the water among the bulrushes.

The Prophets had a great time giving meaningful names: none beats Isaiah inflicting on his second son Maher-shalal-hash-baz – 'The spoil speeds, the prey hastens', the poor lad becoming a sign of the dire future that the prophet was foretelling. In the gospels, we all know that Simon was renamed Peter, the Rock; and James and John were, perhaps jokingly, called by Jesus Boanerges, Sons of Thunder. As for Jesus himself, the angel's name for him was appropriate – Yeshua 'God saves.' It is basically the same name as Joshua, who, the OT tells us, was a saviour to God's people as they entered the Promised Land, expelling or often exterminating the native population as they went. (The utter destructive ruthlessness was not written up with modern standards of factual accuracy. The book 'Joshua' was compiled from many sources over some centuries, and serves a greater theological framework, showing God's care for his People, even bringing good out of the evil of slaughter and destruction.) But Jesus comes bringing promise of salvation of a totally different kind.

Anyway, you get the picture that names in scripture are highly significant, often denoting the character, the life-purpose, the deepest nature of the person. Nearer home, at least in time, Joseph Stalin, not satisfied with his perfectly ordinary surname, re-named

himself 'Stalin' – steel – to emphasize that he was indeed a man of steel. But the connection of name to character is not infallible: I once looked up my own name in one of those dictionaries loved by prospective parents. It said that Harold meant 'powerful warrior'. . . any ambition in that direction I *might* have nurtured in my wartime childhood was given up even sooner than wanting to be an engine driver!

Back to the point: Jesus – 'God Saves', and then also 'Christ', firstly as a title – the Anointed, the Messiah – but gradually becoming a second name; both are expressions of his nature, his purpose in life. So what must it mean when we say 'in the name of Jesus Christ', or 'in the name of God' – who is Father and Son and Holy Spirit? Unless these are just meaningless stick-ons, phrases as automatic and empty as a bored 'haveaniceday-nextplease' at the checkout, they must mean that what we are about to do, or what we have prayed, will be – as far as we are able – according to the character and aims and very nature of Jesus Christ – of God.

When St Paul tells the Colossians 'Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,' he doesn't mean that we should consciously say, aloud or silently, 'in the name of Jesus' every time we sit down or stand up or blow our nose or take a breath! To pause and think or say it occasionally can be helpful, but the point is that the intention for our whole day and all its doing should be 'in the name of', in the *character and intention and purpose* of Jesus Christ. Paul says to the Philippians 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ...' which is a mind-set that enables him to 'take on the nature of a slave and to suffer death, even death on a cross'. And *therefore* God has raised him and given him 'the name that is above every name'.

Many things demand our undivided attention, but can be embraced in that overall purpose or intention. Whether I'm washing up, cycling in rush-hour traffic or writing a sermon, they can equally be 'in the name of Jesus Christ'. Of course, we constantly slip from this. Then we do well to recall George Herbert's hymn and the servant sweeping a room – 'for Thy sake' makes it all turn to gold.

We face a New Year in which about the only certain thing is loads of uncertainty. This can be daunting; so all the more reason to look for stability where it really lies, not in human certainties, nor in worldly rulers, or their weapons, or their isms: all these come and go, leaving a trail of damage, and sometimes good intentions. The Gospels show in subtle ways the striking contrast between Jesus and the powers that be. Right from the birth stories, starkly opposed to those of other self-styled kings of kings, lords of lords, mighty gods, everlasting fathers, saviours and princes of peace. It took despised, 'unclean' shepherds, and sages of a heathen religion, to recognize the true, paradoxical King in a manger. God's supposedly chosen priesthood and royalty wanted to kill him. Many simply let it all pass them by.

Where, as we face this turbulent New Year, can I, can you, be looking to find Christ in places in our own life, and in our communal and national life, from which we've excluded him, or just ignored his presence? Can we find ways of doing, and *being* 'in His name' in those places?

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