

SERMON FOR THE NAMING OF JESUS | 01.01.2017

Names. The names we give our children or streets – or ships! Do names matter that much? Most of us think that they do. We spend a long time choosing the names of our children and are relieved when, by and large, they like them later in life. Although I hate my first name and never use it, I am glad that our children – with equally unusual names, are pleased that – in conjunction with our surname – are almost certainly the only people in the world with that combination...

And names have so many ‘meanings’: Oxford Street means (at least for some) shopping, Cape Canaveral means space rockets, Chernobyl a disastrous nuclear accident. Equally some names have instant recognition and ‘meaning’: one page of ‘A thousand great lives’ provides four instantly recognizable names: Jean-Jacques Rousseau the philosopher, Sir Frederick Royce the car engineer, Peter Paul Rubens the 17th century Flemish painter and Salman Rushdie, author of *Satanic Verses*.

So we can’t be surprised that names and naming is a big deal in the Bible too and that the naming of Jesus gets a day all to itself on January 1st., called in full, The Naming and Circumcision of Jesus. According to custom, on the eighth day a male child is taken to the Temple, a name is given - commonly by the mother - and duly recorded, and then the boy’s foreskin is swiftly removed with a sharp knife, a permanent sign of the solemn covenant made between God and Abraham as found in Genesis.

But it seems that rather nasty ritual was a good deal more permanent than the name that went with it. How many times do we find the names given to people are changed – because of their change in status or circumstances? In the Old Testament we find a lot of examples: Abram became Abraham, Jonathan becomes Nathan, Hadassah (as in the major Jerusalem Hospital) becomes Esther and Jacob became Israel after a night of wrestling with the angel. In the New Testament we get something similar: for example Saul become Paul and Simon becomes Peter.

But the odd thing about so many Bible stories is that key characters have no names at all. What, for example is the name of Noah’s wife? And who did Adam and Eve’s son’s marry?

Alongside the Bible as we know it there are scores of documents of various shades of authenticity which purport to do the job of ‘filling in the gaps’. According to the *Book of Jubilees* – scrolls found in Qumran dating probably from the 2nd century BC and highly regarded by famous figures in the Early Church - after Eve gave birth to Cain and Abel, she then gave birth to a daughter which she called Awan. Awan eventually became Cain’s wife. All very incestuous this but Adam’s third son, Seth, was also married to his sister, a second daughter called Azura. So that is how Adam and Eve managed to have a family of grandchildren!

I am sure you also wanted to know that, in the *Book of Jubilees*, we have the name of Noah’s wife – Emzara, the name of the wife of Potiphar who tried to seduce Joseph – Zuleika, and the name of the Pharaoh’s daughter who took in Moses, floating in the bullrushes – Thematis.

Of course we are all familiar with the names of the three Kings although they are not in the Bible – Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspar – names that only emerged in the 6th century manuscript, the *Excerpta Latina Barbari*. But our friend the Venerable Bede, writer of the great *Ecclesiastical History of England*, tell us that the Three Wise men also came from three different continents – Asia, Africa and Europe – and, furthermore, were descendants respectively of the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth.

The trouble is, if you go to Ethiopia, you get not three but twelve Magi - and their names, as well as those of their fathers, are all recorded by name too!

And did you hope that the names of the shepherds who strayed off the hillsides to proclaim Jesus’ birth were recorded too? Well you are in luck: according to a 13th century Syrian collection edited by Shelemon, bishop of Basra, called *the Book of the Bee*, their names were Asher, Zebulun, Justus, Nicodemus, Joseph, Barshabba and Jose...

Of course you know the names of the twelve apostles – but what about the seventy-two sent out by Jesus in the second wave of mission recorded in Luke 10?

In the *Chronicon Paschale* of 650ad the name Matthias (who took Judas Iscariot's place) is followed by every name that St Paul sends greetings to in his letters, thirty-nine others mentioned by Paul and a few taken from the Book of Acts. Sadly there are some duplications as the list wasn't very well checked over before publication!

I could go on – and I will! There is the name of the child called by Jesus to sit on his knee – Ignatius; there are the names of the two children brought to Jesus to bless – Timothy and Titus - who went on to become senior bishops. There too in the *Book of the Bee* is the name of the rich man who allows Lazarus to die at his gate – Nineveh, symbol of arrogance and luxury. Only later is this changed to Dives in *De pascha computes*, written about 300ad.

The women with the hemorrhages is mentioned in another set of scrolls called *the Acts of Pilate* as Bernice while the mother whose son is brought back to life by Jesus at the city gate is identified as Leah. The robbers on Calvary are called Dysmas and Gestas in the *Acts of Pilate* and the names of the soldiers who took down Jesus' body are said, in the *Book of the Bee*, to be Issachar, Gad, Matthias, Barnabas, and Simon...

OK, that's enough names for one day: As Bruce Metzger who supplied all these details, says: *Few if any of these traditions are based on accurate historical data. The readiness to give names to the biblical nameless is a witness to the fertile imagination of Jewish and Christian writers.*

But why did they go to so much trouble to invent names? Why not simply stick with the bare material that we have in the Bible as we know it? Why invent stuff?

Because the human mind needs stories, and the richer the story the more likely we are to absorb what it is being said to us. Over Christmas I managed, finally, to watch *Les Miserables* for the first time. The names of Jean Valjean and the policeman Javert now mean something. Others have been glued to films and soaps and even Graham Norton's interviews are about getting people to share their stories. And names are so much easier than 'him over there' or 'the one who did so and so....'

In the news at the moment is a terribly sad story about a woman with joint British-Iranian nationality, who works for the charity arm of Reuters news agency. She was in Iran visiting her family when she was arrested and put into the notorious Evin women's jail in Tehran. Her name is Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Her daughter Gabriella is just three and is being looked after by her non-English speaking grandparents in Tehran.

Nazanin. Not an easy name to remember unless we all make the effort. But she is a pawn in a complicated diplomatic row between London and the Iranians and she is getting weaker and weaker by the day. We don't even know what the charges are that she has been convicted of. All we know is that she received a five year sentence.

I could just say "a women in Iran" – even "a mother is Iran". Hardly likely to attract your attention I suspect. Or we could do what God has always done with us, and called us by our special names – because every single one of us is precious in his eyes. Nazanin. Nazanin.

It doesn't really matter what her name is, or whether we can pronounce it properly. But it is her name, Nazanin, and she represents hundreds and thousands of people in Iran who have been falsely accused of crimes and given terrible sentences to endure.

A name is not just a name. It represents the special contribution that an individual makes in the world: *I have called you by your name, says God, and you are mine.* We can laugh at the characters in our soap operas or Christmas films – or the names given to otherwise unnamed characters in the Bible over the years.

But let us not lose sight of the fact that your name helps us to know you and the wonderful things that have been given to do with your life. So today, and for the foreseeable future let's lose sight of that one name: Nazanin. Please pray for her as often as you can and let her name resonate around the world as a symbol of what is going on in Iran at the moment. Nazanin: the name that speaks for injustice around the world.

Just as the name of Jesus is the name that speaks of justice, peace and love wherever it is spoken.