

The Naming of Jesus

In the Church calendar the first day of January is not known as New Year's Day but as the Feast of the Naming of Jesus. And that ritual, at which Jesus was circumcised and given his name, is just mentioned at the end of this morning's gospel reading:

"After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."

Jewish boys are still circumcised on the 8th day after their birth and given their Hebrew name. This name is often thought to be prophetic about the child's future. The parents are not meant to tell others of the name or even use it between themselves before it has been bestowed at the ceremony.

In the Hebrew Bible the act of naming is very meaningful. In the second chapter of Genesis, God brings all the animals to Adam for him to name "whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name". So from the beginning of the Bible the business of naming puts other creatures in relationship to humanity by bringing them into language. It is also, therefore, implies some submission to the authority of the one giving the name.

That can be true of other humans too. At the age of 14 in 1927 my grandmother began her first job as a sales assistant at Dickins and Jones department store on Regent Street. Her name was Miss Miller but there was already a Miss Miller in her department, so she was told she would

be called Miss Millard. Back then, your employer could decide your name. I can't imagine that happening today!

If being named is, in some sense, a submission to another's authority, it is partly for this reason that, in the Hebrew Bible, and still today in Judaism, God cannot be named. When God first appears to Moses in the burning bush and is told to challenge Pharaoh in order to liberate the enslaved Israelites, Moses asks for God's name. He is given a succession of names. Some, like the animals named by Adam, put God in relationship to humanity: the voice from the burning bush says that he is "the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob". But also revealed is the divine name, the name God gives himself. That is the four Hebrew Letters that spell Yahweh or Jehovah. We sometimes call it the Tetragrammaton from the Ancient Greek "consisting of four letters". It's usually translated as "I am who I am", but friends who are Hebrew scholars tell me that it is more like "The one who will be with you". And still today rabbis and traditional Jews will not say it. When they read the text aloud, they substitute "Ha Shem" meaning "The Name". And even Christians have not used it habitually. In our Bibles, we mostly translate it as the LORD and that's the name we use most in Church: "The Lord be with you", "This is the Gospel of the Lord", and so on.

So the Tetragrammaton is the name that God gives himself, but even using that is dangerous. *Any* language we use about God is inadequate and potentially idolatrous. Use the word "God" today and people have all kinds of unhelpful notions in their head about an old man with a beard, an authoritarian patriarch, a kind of Wizard of Oz figure pulling the strings behind the scenes. And these days people dislike the name "Lord" too, because of its connotations of power and dominion.

It seems to me that all we can do is keep being creative in the language we use about God, recognising that no name can ever encapsulate the divine. This is why angry debates about whether we can use feminine language about the divine are so facile. Both masculine and feminine imagery are equally metaphorical when applied to God. The God who is beyond space and time is beyond description in language. He is beyond all names.

That's why the naming of Jesus is such a significant and integral part of the incarnation. Here we are confronted with the great mystery of Christmas. As we have just sung, "The great God of heaven is come down to earth". That is an extraordinary and deeply mysterious outpouring of God into the fragility of our bodily created life, a fragility that we see today in Gaza and Ukraine, a fragility we experience in our own pain and ill health, a fragility that will be fully entered into on the cross on Good Friday.

But the incarnation is also an immersion in the frustrations and inadequacy of language. Frequently in the gospels we find Jesus telling people not to say he is the Messiah, not because it's untrue, but because the connotations people have with that word will distort their expectations of him and his mission. He tries to communicate in actions louder than words, in miracles and healings that point beyond language to the life of the Kingdom that is to come. But the limitations of language are unavoidable in this world, and he still gets dragged into the word games of those who put him on trial, eventually responding only with silence.

So the incarnate God is subject to a name, "Jesus" which means "God saves". And that is the prophetic destiny to which this baby submits in his

circumcision. It is a destiny with which we know Jesus struggles in the Garden of Gethsemane. A name can carry a heavy burden. But it is the name given, not by human parents, but by God through the angel Gabriel. And since this child is God incarnate the name is, like Yahweh, the name God gives himself. This name Jesus is the name above all names. It is God with us, God for us, always, inexhaustibly, to death and beyond.