

The Circumcision/Naming of Jesus

Phil. 2: 4ff.

Luke 2:15ff.

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Yes, I know; today is January the 1st; New Year's Day, Father Time handing off to a younger generation, the turning of the calendar, out with the old and in with the new, another list of resolutions. It is also the 8th day of Christmas, the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus. Admittedly it is a rather obscure day to many Christians, but it shouldn't be. The Gospel lesson overlaps with what we heard on the Eve of the Nativity, but then takes us a vital step further in the story of Jesus and Mary. In this very Jewish family, and set of practices, centuries of hope and anticipation came literally to touch the world—and if we are alert, to touch us as well.

Thousands of children are labelled every day, so, what's in a name? Does a name really signify or do something meaningful? It seems quite a lot for the debate has gone on for centuries!! Do you remember the lines in Shakespeare's play where Juliet urges her love; "deny thy father, and refuse thy name... What's a Montague... be some other name. That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet". Put sufficiently, your moniker doesn't matter. Of course Romeo discovers that it matters quite intensely. And diametrically opposite is Gertrude Stein who wrote, "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose". In other words one cannot simply ignore a name as if it were trivial or randomly interchangeable. Can you imagine trading names with the person sitting next to you? It will not work because your name is merged with who you are. We use nicknames, pet names, maiden names because there is something special found in them, and we do not wish to forget that.

In Judaism a boy is named on the 8th day, and so it is with Jesus, but with one exception; his parents did not select his name; it was given in a divine encounter, and the name is Yeshua—Joshua. It is a name with the weight of history, family, tribe; total identity. Anyone who had read or heard Isaiah knew what this name carries; anyone who knew the wandering in the wilderness and entry into the Promised Land felt what "Yeshua" pointed toward. It means Yahweh will save, be present, deliver, and even more God is salvation. This name contains the meaning of this person we come to praise and worship. It is his mission, and when that name is on our lips it calls forward the whole history of God's embracing actions in history, from people being lead out of exile, to our own being lifted out of the power of sin and despair. Jesus comes to put back together what has been broken by sin; our self-esteem, our relationships with one another and with God. We have times when we come to realize how we cannot mend the fractures in life. What do call it? Irreconcilable Differences! This "putting together is what we mean by the word, sacrifice. That requires something or rather someone, extraordinary.

On this 8th day not only is Jesus named, but he is receives the sign of the Covenant; Circumcision. That act both identifies him as one of God's people, but also it is the first small sign of his sacrifice, because it requires blood to be shed. And later in life at Gethsemane he sweats blood over his mission and his struggle to be faithful to it. Then when in Pilate's court he is scourged, and in carrying his cross, and even when dead and his side is pierced blood is present. It is the cost of deep and abiding love. It is what is shed when others are valued and their well-being is sought above one's self. It is deeply personal and Jesus brings God to us and to bear on this world in a very personal way.

This season of Christmas is not merely about a small baby boy, but about who he is for us. When you hear his name, what does it illicit? Luke says Mary heard and witnessed all of this and “pondered in her heart”. That is she turned it over and over and reflected, and questioned, and made sense of, and finally gave assent to the presence and action of God in this child that was hers. What did she see? Just as critically, what do we behold and grasp? Origen, the great Alexandrian theologian, offers this metaphor. “Let us suppose, for example, that there existed a statue so great that it filled all the world, but which on account of its immensity, made it imperceptible to anyone, and another statue was made similar to the first in every detail, in shape of limbs, and outline of features, in form and matter, except not in its immense size, so that those who were unable to perceive and behold the immense one, could be confident that they had seen it when they looked upon the small one. For it was in every respect like what could not be seen before.” The miracle of Christmas is that we have been given the living, human experience of God, and who God is for us!!! And He looks like Jesus!

Mary pondered. That was not just in her intellect, but in her heart and will, too. Robert Barron says, “she turned them over, sought out their causes, saw their implications, allowed them to work their way into the marrow of her bones.” What about our hearts—the seat of what we hold dear, true, and of final value?

I grew up in the South and the name of Jesus was tossed about as freely as the wind blows. I suspect far too often we prayed for things that were suspiciously self-serving without considering the implications on others should we get what we prayed for. And of course, we ended those brief supplications with “In Jesus’ Name”, as if it were a magical incantation. Let me invite you to pray this name often, but not in a rote or mindless way, but from the core of your being. Whatever our situations in life, our challenges and hurts, or joys, this holy Name can become our prayer. It is not that we use it to change God’s mind, for that is not what needs alteration. Rather it can make a difference in us. It can transform how we see our desires, how we use our energies, how we encounter the trials of life, and who we know ourselves to be—redeemed people. Praying in the Holy Name can touch us when we have lost our way, become apathetic, or unconcerned about the needs of others, because it can lead us to transcend our limits and shadows.

Here we are at the beginning of a new year-2017. We could approach it with more resolutions, extra effort, and even some positive self-talk. I have realized that the past 2 years of my life have gone directions none of us could have foretold. That will be true of this year as well for all of us. We may have great joys or considerable roadblocks. That is not the question before us. The question is whether or not those events will be seen through the eyes and voice of faith. Will our year bring us to act and live consistent with the One whose Holy Name resides in our ponderings and in our hearts and on our lips; the One who comes to set us free from fear and sin, and bring us to signs of his peace. Amen+