

Homily for the First Sunday after Christmas

+ Today is all about *names*. Names are mysterious things. Parents give names to their children—other names are acquired through reputation, whether good or ill. Still others attach themselves almost accidentally, and stick for reasons that sometimes defy logic or expectation. Names are carriers of meaning, windows that open on invisible realities—admiration, respect, disdain, fear, hope for the future, reverence for the past. Things don't always work out the way we name them. I'm guessing the mother and father who christened Edward Teach weren't planning on Blackbeard the pirate. If you're keeping score, I think that may be the first mention of pirates in a Christmas homily, ever. A mad and bloodthirsty Roman emperor, actually named Gaius Caesar, becomes known in history by the affectionate nickname given to him, as a boy, when among his father's soldiers, "Caligula," *Little Boots*. As athletes, authors, actors, and musicians, men and women discard their old names, becoming something new. Whoever heard of Marion Morrison, Norma Jean Mortenson, Eric Blair, or Charles Dodgson? These names—only a few examples—have faded. What remains are the John Waynes, Marilyn Monroes, George Orwells, and Lewis Carrolls. Like pen-names and stage names, often chosen merely for how they sound, the naming of children nowadays often has less a weight of meaning than it often did in the past, and especially as it was once practiced among the Hebrew and Aramaic-speaking peoples of the Old and New Testaments. For the people of the Bible, as for many ancient cultures, the naming of a child was a nearly magical act, a sacramental commentary on past, present, or future. It had a grounding and directive force. It often gave expression to the contours of relationship between God and man. To give a name, in that culture, and especially if it was the name of some hero or heroine of the past, was to summon anew the past reality of God's providence for and protection of His people, to invoke it in the present and for the future. It was an act of *anamnesis*, of "remembrance," in the sense that Christ commands His disciples to "remember Him" in the Eucharist.

The gospel today gives to us the names of Joseph and Mary. Like his famous and many-time great uncle, the carpenter from Nazareth is also the son of a man named Jacob. The name, "Joseph," means in Hebrew, "God will increase" or "God will cause to prosper." The Joseph of the Old Testament, sold by his resentful brothers into Egyptian slavery, certainly had cause to ruminate with bitter irony over his handle in the darkness of Pharaoh's dungeons. Yet, despite the low place in which he finds himself, the older Joseph lives up to the name. Go back sometime and read Genesis 39, the "low-point" in the story of Joseph—sold as a slave, falsely accused by his Egyptian master's wife, long confined in prison. The refrain there, in the text of the Old Testament, is the phrase, "but the Lord," *i.e.* Yahweh, *I am that I am*, "was with him."

Kyrios meta sou, in Greek. *Dominus tecum*, in Latin. In our English offices and mass, we have turned it from statement into exhortation. *The Lord be with you*, we repeat so often. The phrase in Hebrew, Latin, and in Greek, while it can function in that encouraging sort of way, actually is capable of functioning on a variety of different levels. It can mean *the Lord has been with you*, *the Lord is with you*, and *the Lord will be with you*. And it is arguably in this last sense, and in a way quite literally unlike any Divine presence before or since, that these words are delivered to Mary by the angelic messenger who foretells the birth of Christ, from which our liturgical refrain is drawn.

Mary herself possesses the name of an Old Testament heroine. In Aramaic and Hebrew, the name *Miriam* means, most probably, something like "sea of bitterness," or perhaps "the bitterness of my people." Like Joseph's name, it is tied to that biblical narrative around which the ancient Hebrews built their cultural identity—the sojourn of Israel in Egypt, and the deliverance of the exodus. It was

the name given by the mother of Moses to his sister, Miriam the prophetess. It is a name signifying the weight of despair and exhaustion of a people subjugated by oppression and slavery, subject to outrages like Pharaoh's murder of the Israelite children; it is virtually a complaint against or a challenge to God, daring Him to act. Act He does, with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, and it is Miriam who leads the exultant chorus in psalms of triumph and joy, giving thanks to God who “hath cast both horse and rider into the sea.” In this, Mary the mother of our Lord follows her namesake closely, and her *Magnificat*—*He hath showed strength with His arm, He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts; He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and hath exalted the humble and meek*—this psalm is a New Testament recapitulation of the same joy expressed in Miriam's song on the further bank of the Red Sea.

What is interesting here is the way in which the very names of Joseph and Mary invoke the oppression of Israel in Egypt. These are people waiting to be delivered. As the ages have turned, Pharaoh, it turns out—the name of the Egyptian monarchs which means, literally, “great house,” is alive and well. He was only a finite expression of a deeper, malevolent, and tyrannical order which continually plagues the human condition, because we ourselves carry about with us and in us the tools of its construction. How to escape a prison of your own construction?—for the “big house” of Pharaoh is, if I can be forgiven a horribly bad pun, is more like the Big House of modern American slang than the palace it originally described. Sin that so easily ensnares and enslaves is the Egypt we carry with us, what St. Paul calls in Galatians *the elements or the fundamental principles of the world to which we were in bondage*. In that place, like Joseph, we ought to hope and pray that God will be with us.

To return to Joseph, he is presented, in our gospel today, again like his famous relative, as a dreamer. Joseph is described as a just man—but also, like Joseph of Genesis, a man of mercy. “What you meant for evil God has turned to good purpose,” Joseph tells his brothers, when they are finally reconciled. Likewise, when Joseph hears of his espoused wife's condition, rather than visit punishment or public shame on her, he is minded to release her from betrothal without making a scene. Then he dreams a dream, in which it is announced to Him, as to Mary, the coming birth of a son, conceived by the Holy Spirit—and *thou shalt call His name JESUS*. In Hebrew culture, the Father gives the name. Joseph is therefore invited to fulfill the function, but direction comes from elsewhere. “Jesus,” or in Hebrew, *Yehoshua*: The Lord will save. *Emmanuel*, the evangelist goes on to add, referring the prophet Isaiah, *meth hemon ho theos, Dominus nobiscum*, “The Lord be with us.” God will save, and will do so by dwelling with us, literally, in the words of St. John's gospel appointed for Christmas day, by *establishing his tent or house* in our midst.

It's a bold move, surprising, and contrary to human logic. What does God do to redeem the world, which has become, through man's own sinfulness, a prison, a realm of tyranny and hard labor, a world over which that bent and perverted spirit which manifests itself in Pharaohs, Caligulas, not to mention Blackbeards, can rightly be said to rule—the Prince of this World, the accuser and persecutor of the saints, that ancient Serpent and enemy of the human race. He puts a tent up in the Big House. He enters the prison Himself. As he was with Joseph in the dungeon, so now he is *with us*, “robed in flesh,” as we will shortly sing, “pleased with man as man to dwell.” He is not ashamed to call us, the children of bitterness, His brothers, saying, as the author of Hebrews writes: *I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee. And again, I will put my trust in him. And again, Behold I and the children which God hath given me. Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but*

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he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.

Christ saves us from the tyrannical order of sin, from the elements of the world to which we were in bondage, by entering into them, by taking on to himself, in company with those He is not ashamed to call brothers, the weight and terror of that oppression. Because He, both Man and God, was able not only to bear that burden, but to bear it in perfect righteousness, he has been crowned with glory and honor. All things are in subjection under His feet. It's His big house now.

And if brothers of Christ, then what? There are some names that are more than names. You don't acquire them by reputation. They are not given to you, at least not necessarily, because of something that you do. They describe realities and relationships that cannot be replicated, because they are unique and unrepeatable. They are bound up with essences, with the very nature of things. I got such a name after the birth of my first son, David. He calls me Dad. True, I sometimes go by "Father Peter," these days—and that address is meant to express the responsibility that a Christian priest has toward the members of Christ's church. But only the kids in the back pew there will call me Dad, as there's only one man here I could use that name for and feel, in my bones, the truth that the syllable really conveys.

In all this talk of names, St. Paul reminds us today that the gospel—Christ's entering into the world, His glad humility and suffering, his subversive occupation of Pharaoh's house in the dwelling of human flesh—ultimately this gospel is evidence of a deep reality, as deep and as real as the truth we feel in uttering the names of Mom and Dad—that God Himself, through His Son, our elder brother and captain, again as the book of *Hebrews* puts it, has sent His Spirit into our hearts, that we may know Him to be *Abba*—Father—Dad—to make us sensible of a relationship and a love that, no matter how broken, and no matter how joyful our relationship with our earthly parents might be, transcends and passes all. In the mystery of Christmas, in Jesus Christ, God Himself clothed with our humanity, We know God to be with us, and that he is Our Father. This is good tidings of great joy, which is for all people. + Amen.