

The Feast of the Holy Name, January 1st 2011

Readings: Numbers 6: 22-27, Luke 2: 15-21

“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.”

I was talking with a young couple the other day about their upcoming wedding and the conversation came round to the bride wrestling with whether or not she was going to change her name. It's a question most couples have to face these days. I know I've had the same conversation with many couples and, indeed, I've had it myself, twice, and while possibly in the past it was simply a given, these days it isn't and it can be quite a big deal. That was certainly the case with this young lady, and so we talked about where the tradition of the woman taking her husband's name comes from, as a symbol of the transfer of property from one man to another, and how these days it's more a symbol of two becoming one, and we discussed how it was equally possible for her husband to take her name, and that wasn't going to happen, and ultimately what was clear was that for this woman at the heart of the question was the issue of identity. Her name said something about who she was, and that something was important to her, and she wasn't going to change it lightly.

Our name says something about who we are.

I remember before both my sons were born we had the usual discussions about what we were going to name them, and in Alex's case it was quite easy. Alexandra was his mother's middle name and Robert was mine, and so if it was a boy, Alexander Robert, if a girl, Alexandra and we would cross the middle name when we got to it because Roberta wasn't going to fly with either of us. Simon, on the other hand, was harder. I really wanted a girl and we both liked the name Georgia so we were agreed on that with the middle name to be decided but as usual he had to be difficult, and so when he turned out to be a boy we chose Simon because it was a neutral name that wasn't going to offend anyone in either of our families, and I wasn't allowed to name him after Thomas the Tank Engine, and we went with John for the middle name because both my father and Simon's uncle were called John, so everyone was happy.

Behind every name there is a story.

I'm willing to bet that if we wanted to we could sit here for hours and swap naming stories. How did you get your name? I'm named after an uncle who died as a child. Why did you call your children what you did? Even in our culture, where for the most part we're not overly caught up in traditional names or names as marks of status, names are still important, names are still much more than just labels to make it easier to tell one another apart.

Names are important.

In the wider Christmas story the naming of Jesus marks an end to the chapter. Having taken us through the visitation and the annunciation, then a detailed picture of the Bethlehem story with the angels and the shepherds, Luke now takes us forward a week, to the 8th day, when the Jewish law says every male child must be circumcised, and when Jesus is named, bringing us back circle to when the angel told Mary, 'you shall name him Jesus'. There's a symmetry to this that's important to a story-teller like Luke, but there's

also an essential statement being made – this child who was treasured by his mother, this baby who was lying in a manger, this baby was both from God, as promised by an angel, and a boy like any other, circumcised and named on the 8th day, along with every other Jewish boy.

Those, of course, are the two sides of Christmas; on the one we have the son of God born in Bethlehem, a mysterious star overhead, with shepherds and a chorus of angels approaching in the distance. On the other we have the homeless family, forced into an animal shelter so that mother can give birth to a helpless child forced to sleep in a feeding trough. And the baby, vulnerable, normal, magical like every baby, but absolutely common, because each and every one of us was a baby just like him. And in his circumcision and naming Jesus even more becomes a normal child of his time and place, a truth that lies at the very heart of the real Christmas miracle; the incarnation, in which the Word becomes flesh and lives among us, God takes on our skin and bone and shifts into the neighbourhood.

That's the beginning of the Christian story and it's appropriate I think that we are reminded of that on the real first day of the year, even though the church has already started a new one at the beginning of Advent.

As we begin 2012 we're invited to reflect on the name chosen by God for the Word made flesh, Jesus, and equally we're invited to think also about the name chosen for us all at our baptisms; Christian. Just as our names say something about who we are, what does that name say about us? In Jesus' culture a name said something not just about who you were, but also for what you were destined. Abraham was renamed by God as 'father of many', Moses means 'to draw out', although some scholars want to argue that point, and Jesus, of course, is 'the salvation of Yahweh'. In his name, in their names, was a promise, and their lives were dedicated to fulfilling it. Are ours?

As we move into this New Year how will we live out the promise of our name 'Christian'? It means 'follower of Christ' so how will we make that true this year? How will we live out that name in our everyday lives, at work, at home, with family, with friends, with those we don't know and those we don't really want to?

That's the question I believe we're offered this New Year's Day – how will we live out the name God has given us? This is the name that has been put on us through baptism, just as God's name was put on the Israelites through Aaron and his sons, the ultimate blessing that God could and can offer, to be called God's people, to be children of God.

We are those who wear that name today. May we be aware of it, may we be worthy of it, may we both blessed and a blessing by it, and may we wear it well, this and every day. Amen.