

Sunday 1 Jan: The holy Name of Jesus

What an odd festival we celebrate this Sunday. Everything about it is a bit strange. While the world celebrates the beginning of a New Year with Kaapse Klopse parade, with sleeping in late to recover from hangovers and perhaps joining the throngs at the beach; here we are in Church to mark the observance of the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus. Most Sundays have a Gospel lesson that is a parable of Jesus, or a miracle of healing, or a bit of his teaching, today the Gospel lesson although 6 verses long, five of these are scene setting and only one verse gives us the message for the day: Luke 2:21, *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.*

A whole festival is summed up one verse? Yes, because there is enough in this one verse to spend a month of Sundays examining. This one verse spells the end of our condemnation under the Law and the beginning of our salvation.

How? Why? Although the circumcision and naming of a baby boy in Israel was an everyday occurrence, that of Mary's son was different. Every Jewish baby boy since Isaac had gone through the ceremony. It is the reception of the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham to bless him, make him a nation, and to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. It was simply what happened on the eighth day after the birth of a son; everyone was used to it.

From Isaac, son of Sarah, on down, all the baby boys had to be circumcised to be in the covenant. But why did baby Jesus need to be circumcised? Jesus has no need to be in Abraham's covenant, for he is, as he told us, the God of Abraham who made the covenant in the first place! Jesus has no need of the Law, for he is the great Law-giver. Jesus has no need to spill his blood, for he is the God to whom the blood of all the sacrifices of old was spilt.

But here, on the eighth day, for the first time Jesus feels the knife of the Law on our behalf. Here, on the eighth day, for the first time, Jesus steps into the place of human sinners and takes upon himself their duties, their burdens, their punishment. On the eighth day, Jesus comes under the Law so that we may come under grace. It is on the eighth day that this happens for the eighth day is the day of new creation; and in his coming under the Law Jesus makes all things new. For it was on the eighth day after the flood that God started over with Noah and his family – eight people in all. It was on the eighth day – the first day of a new week – that our Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead. These "eights" in God's Word and plan of salvation are not coincidence. God is carefully presenting these events to us, so that we can look on Jesus on this eighth day and see our salvation.

We look at this one verse in our Gospel lesson and recall our sinfulness laid upon the Son of God, for make no mistake, it is our burden he bears, it is the knife meant for us that cuts him. For our unclean thoughts, for our cruel words, for our back-stabbing and bickering and grudges and despair – for all this and more, he is consigned to bleed and die on the cross.

But this strange day has another theme besides Circumcision. It is also called The Holy Name of Jesus. As I said just now, it is on the eighth day that a Jewish boy child is circumcised and named. How do we go about naming the Son of God? The answer, it seems, is with a very common name, so that there is nothing to make him stand out from other Jewish boys. "Jesus", a shortened form of "Joshua", or "Yeshua" in Hebrew, was a common name for pious Jews to give their sons. The meaning of names was important, and Yeshua meant "Yahweh, God, is salvation."

Naming, in the biblical stories, is both a divine and human activity. In the creation stories, God starts by naming his creation, but then, in a delightful twist to the story, waits to see what his own creation, the man Adam, will name the animals. There is a sense of collaborative purpose in naming that continues through the Old Testament as, occasionally, God intervenes to specify the name of a child for a particular reason.

Matthew explains that this child is named Jesus because he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1.21). This extension of the meaning of Yeshua from “God is salvation” hints at this baby’s divinity.

The same applies in Luke’s Gospel, although the angel’s explanation to Mary is slightly different: this child will be great, the Son of the Most High, and will inherit David’s throne and reign over the house of Jacob for ever (Luke 1.32-33). This recalls Isaiah’s words from our OT reading about a child’s being born who will inherit David’s throne for ever, being called “Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9.6).

But none of that prophetic weight of meaning would be obvious to look at this child, born in a stable in a strange town, looking and crying like any other eight-day-old baby when he was circumcised, with a name that did nothing to draw attention to his future.

Today’s observance of the naming of Jesus reminds us of Jesus’ full humanity and, in his first 30 years of life, of his unremarkableness as he lived and worked with his family.

One of the dangers is that we who confess that Jesus is Lord can find ourselves reading back into this story with the wisdom of hindsight what we know about his death, resurrection, and ascension. But Luke, who has been quite free with his stories of angelic messengers in the events leading up to and at his birth, suddenly goes silent on divine interventions, and instead tells us of a routine circumcision as far as the people around Mary and Joseph were concerned.

Luke is setting up the story of Jesus’ ministry by telling us that, although a few people had special insight into who Jesus was, most people thought he was an ordinary good Jewish boy. As the Gospel unfolds, people will have to respond to Jesus’ actions and his words in order to understand that he is indeed God’s salvation living among them. And those who do come to understanding and make the confession that this Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, have the joy of calling his father our father, “Abba”.

The lovely reading from Acts is Peter’s explanation into how the crippled man who used to beg in Solomon’s portico was healed. It was through the power of the **name of Jesus**. Peter says: *this man is standing before you in good health by the **name** of Jesus Christ of Nazareth ... there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other **name** under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.*

Names are weird things! Primitive people believed they would have power over another person if they knew that person’s name. That is why Jacob demanded to know the name of person he had wrestled with all night; why Moses at the burning bush wanted to know God’s name so as to tell the people under whose authority he was operating. Knowing a person’s name also has a positive side. Fifty years ago on 30th December 1961, Dougie Jephtha and Mary Smith got married here at St Paul’s. In those days it was expected that a wife would adopt her husband’s family name. I hope that for you Mary adopting your husband’s name has imparted a blessing on both of you, a sense of unity, of oneness.

God’s name imparts God’s blessing. We who call ourselves Christian bear the name of Jesus today — Jesus now revealed to be the Son of God and bearing the Messianic name “Christ”. We are blessed in him. So today’s Feast Day is worth celebrating; Firstly, for the naming of the infant Jesus; Secondly, because circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God and ‘Abraham and his children’ And thirdly, it can be viewed as traditionally the first shedding of Christ’s blood for us human beings.

These are all cause for celebration on this feast of the Naming of Jesus, as we begin a new calendar year of our Lord.