

The Naming and circumcision of Jesus – Sunday 2 January 2022

If I asked you what special day always comes eight days after Christmas Day, I expect you'd almost certainly say, New Year's Day and wonder why I was asking. But in the Christian calendar in the old prayer book, this eighth Day is called the feast of the circumcision. As a child I used to wonder what on earth that was, but nobody would ever tell me!

Nowadays in the modern church calendar it's called the naming of Jesus. This year, as Sunday falls only one day later, it's an opportunity to focus for a change on this naming of Jesus

Names are very important. As a teacher knowing all the pupils' names is key to control of the class and facilitating effective learning. If someone isn't paying attention and you address them immediately by name it's so much more effective than saying, "Hey you in the back row"! That just gives an excuse for innocent looks and cheeky remarks, such as, "Oo d'ya mean Miss?"

My memory is by no means as sharp now as it was when I was a teacher and I find it much harder to remember names, so if I forget yours I humbly ask for your forgiveness in advance. But isn't it great when people do remember your name? It's so affirming.

When I was grown up I finally discovered why my Mum and Dad named me Carole. It's a very romantic story that fills me with a warm glow but if you want details you'll have to ask me some other time!

You may well know that it's the Jewish custom to both name and circumcise baby boys on the eighth day after their birth, hence the old and new names of this particular day in our church calendar. The tradition goes all the way back to Abraham when God calls him to leave his home and journey to an unknown land to be the father of a new nation, a people called to follow a new way of life that will mark them out from the idol worshipping peoples around them. A nation who will grow to understand more and more about the one true God and bring his light to the world", a light to lighten the gentiles", as their great prophet Isaiah expresses it, hundreds of years later. Circumcision is to be the physical marking of the flesh of all their baby boys as a sign that they belong to God's people... and possibly originally for health reasons too in those ancient times.

As we know, over the centuries they often fail in their holy calling to be God's light to the nations and finally Jesus comes into the world, the human face of God himself. He's born as one of them and brought up by God fearing parents, mother Mary and foster father Joseph, in accordance with all the laws and traditions of God's people,

So on the eighth day after his birth Mary and Joseph have him circumcised and, in obedience to the angel, named Jesus or in Hebrew Yeshuya. It's not a name unique to Jesus himself but, as was so often the case in the Jewish tradition, it's a name with a particular meaning for a particular person. Yeshuya means salvation, or rescue. To that we now add Christ and that

does of course make it unique. Christ is from the Greek word for the anointed one, the messiah, Jesus Christ, our anointed saviour and Lord.

Nowadays sadly many people use his holy name simply as an exclamation, more often than not a swear word. Occasionally it would escape from the lips of one of my pupils; at first I'd just smile and say, "I think you can manage that question by yourself without praying first, can't you?" They would say, "What do you mean Miss?" and then there'd be a good opportunity for some discussion before returning to the topic of the lesson. If they persisted then of course I'd forbid them to use the name disrespectfully.

A gentle word, if appropriate, in circumstances like that can be a good opening for a conversation about faith.

The name of Jesus Christ should be very precious to us all.

When we become a follower of Jesus Christ we ourselves take on part of this precious name, don't we. We call ourselves Christians, and until recently it was customary to refer to our first names as our Christian names. But the other day, to my surprise, someone took me to task for using that word. "You mean your forename", he said. I apologised for being non PC if I had offended him but said I still called myself a Christian, not because I was superior to anyone else but that I was a follower of Jesus Christ. We had quite a good chat after that, each listening to the other as well as saying what we each thought.

In my infant Sunday school in the late nineteen forties we used to sing, every week, a song that began, "I do belong to Jesus", and the second and third verses went, "The priest poured holy water, my Christian name he said, and made the sign of Jesus upon my baby head. I now belong to Jesus, I am a child of God, I have a home in heaven with Jesus Christ my lord." Having relegated all that stuff to my childhood when I became an arrogant young student, I now realise what a great truth this little song contains.

We have our Christian names and our surnames that define who we are but we have other names too, names others may give us and names we may give ourselves. They might be pleasant or neutral or unpleasant, maybe based on our appearance or abilities- the pretty one or its opposite, the clever one or its opposite, maybe "you star"! Or "you rogue"! Or worse! I am sure you can think of many more. People can get into name calling and those insulted can be upset or wounded or even psychologically scarred. Jesus himself, was called a variety of names; some he gave himself, "The son of man", The light of the world, the good shepherd. Others were given to him by his followers, "rabbi, master", and in a great outburst from Thomas after the resurrection, "my Lord and my god". Some names were thrown at him as insults. There's an old saying that goes, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me".

I don't believe that for a minute. As a child I used to pretend I believed it but it didn't stop the pain when I was called nasty names.

The best antidote to any hurtful or harmful names we might feel oppressing us is to remember the name God gives us: My beloved child- - my beloved Jane or Mike, or Rosie or Keith or Marian- -or whatever our Christian name may be... for that is who we are. Not because of what we've done but because of what Jesus Christ has done for us.

Sadly there's great ignorance in our land nowadays about Jesus Christ. I'm sure you can think of many instances where people's ignorance has astounded you. Once, after I'd taken a service of home communion in a care home and offered communion to any resident who wanted to receive, a young carer sidled up to me and whispered, in a shocked tone, "Didn't you know that Tony is a Jew?". "So was Jesus", I replied gently. She looked horrified. "Oh no!" she gasped. "He can't possibly have been!" I explained that nearly all the writers in the Bible were Jews and her eyes grew wider. She seemed quite fascinated.

Judging by the number of people who were drawn to our churches by the story of Jesus's birth over the Christmas period, in spite of the pandemic, the need to book tickets and all the rest of it. It's clear that there's still a hunger out there for the things of the spirit, the things that money can't buy. Archers fans amongst us will know that it's quite a hot topic even in Ambridge just now and the recent death of Archbishop Desmond Tutu has attracted massive attention all over the world.

Do we always fully appreciate how privileged we are to know the good news of the love of God for his whole creation? A love shown supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray? Do we, like those shepherds returning from the manger, want to spread this good news far and wide?

It isn't easy in what's often at best an apathetic and at worst a hostile world. But as those who bear his name it's our calling and our privilege to make the name of Jesus known in every way we can, in word and in action. So, let's allow this feast of the naming of Jesus to be a fresh incentive at the beginning of this fresh New Year.

Amen.

Carole Lewis