



CHESTER
CATHEDRAL

1 January 2017
Cathedral Eucharist

Numbers 6:22-27; Luke 2:15-21

'What's in a name?'
The naming of Jesus

May I speak now in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Amen.

What's in a name? It is a difficult time of year for my postgraduate students. They are on a two year course of study which runs for two calendar years – so they have just submitted their final assignments and pieces of work; and will have their final clinical assessments where they, as therapeutic radiographers, have to be able to treat any patient prescribed for radiotherapy. Then, they are out into the big wide world, to work in radiotherapy departments across the country, caring for patients; saving lives! As lecturers, we have their assignments to mark – all electronically these days, all anonymously. Once I have marked them, they are then scrutinised by another colleague and externally sampled before the names can be revealed, and we know how they have done. There are always surprises, when the names are revealed. Some may not have done as well as anticipated; some surprise by doing better than anticipated – and I love seeing the ones who have developed over the two years, with grades getting better and better – especially in Physics, which is often their biggest fear when starting the course.

Their grades are important, yes – but I often advise, they are not defined by a number...their worth is so much more than that. Their names and who they are are more important. What they have done – how they have learnt and developed, in terms of knowledge and understanding, yes, but also who they are in terms of care and compassion. So both their names, but also what they do, their actions, how and why they do them – and for whom, our patients - truly defines who they are. For some, what they are about to do, in caring for others, is a calling, a vocation – they are drawn to something they are good at, enjoy and definitely want to make a difference for our cancer patients. That was evident when we first asked them why they chose the course, and most recently, their hopes and dreams as they go out to enact that calling, in hospitals around the UK. The calling happens, when we have a name – we are called by name; and we are defined by both name and action. In both of our readings today, calling and action are at the heart of the matter. The first is set during the exodus; the part of the journey from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land, after they have been called out of slavery in Egypt, led by Moses. The words are probably familiar to many of us; as words of blessing often used in our worship – the passage is called the priestly or Aaronic blessing or benediction.

Within the context of this section of scripture, its placement is unusual; probably being used to prepare the people for their journey through the wilderness. A blessing for the times of departure from one displaced place to the next; a time of hardship and despair, often discouraged and in fear – a journey that we hear many are on in their lives today in war-torn parts of the world. Each line of the blessing has God as the subject, and it was surely an encouragement to the Israelites since in these few lines, God's benevolence on all parts of life are described, especially God's will for the people.

Blessing itself had a wide-ranging meaning, touching every sphere of life; showing God's benevolence is across all of creation, within a community of faith, but so too, as the bible goes on to indicate, outside the community too – to all peoples, without condition.

Blessing is that divine gift, serving the life and health of the community. The action of 'keeping' has connotations of safety, and being under God's protection from all forms of evil – very pertinent for

wandering in the wilderness. The benevolence of the face, in smiles and warmth of welcome is something we encounter often – here it is in the face of God, that kindness is shown. The lifting up shows that it is God doing the moving; the movement that only God could do, to bring us back into one with the Father, through Jesus Christ, as we believe as Christians; bringing wholeness and fullness of life. All under God's name; the ultimate seal of approval, emphasising the divine source of all blessings. The Israelites were called out of Egypt, encouraged daily by the reminder of God's love and blessing towards those who are called – which is ultimately all of us. But, we are free agents; to respond to that calling, we must provide the action. God will provide the blessing; how will we respond?

It is an anomaly of the lectionaries that the Gospel reading for today is virtually identical to one we used last week for Christmas day; no matter – it only serves to illustrate additionally how each time we read scripture, something new and alive and afresh is there, waiting for us to hear – but so too waiting for us to respond to...the word of God. We hear again how the shepherds, as I mentioned last week, one of the lowliest sections of society at the time, are indeed the first to hear of the news of Jesus, the Christ; the anointed one, the Messiah. Luke is at pains, throughout his writing, to emphasise the Good News is for everyone, not just the elite; all sections of society – especially those at the margins, the poor, the sick, the downtrodden and outcast.

There is action again – but this time even before the name is formalised. Jesus, the name spoken of by the Angel before he was born, is given his name in the formal Jewish rite; Jesus, the one who saves; God is Salvation. The action of the shepherds responding to their own calling is invoked before the formal naming – already salvation is taking place – even before Jesus has been named; before he can even walk or talk. Mary, we hear, ponders all these things in her heart – the commotion around the stable, the fact that they themselves are displaced, no place to give birth except this lowly stable – is this really the birth place of the anointed one, the one to bring salvation? It must have crossed her mind surely? And what will it all mean – did she know what miracles he would perform; or indeed what pain he would suffer...for our sakes?

Jesus' very name itself might mean divinely salvation – but even he is defined not just by his name, but by his actions too. History will show how he truly becomes the one who saves through the activity – the activity of his words and teaching, his lifestyle of prayer and caring for all, his healing and compassion, his ministry and indeed his sacrifice. As disciples, how can we fulfil that calling to do likewise? A calling, which Rowan Williams once so beautifully described in his collection of sermons 'Open to Judgement' as a 'call by God to be individuals, distinctively ourselves.....bearers of our names answering to the word which gives each its identity. It is a vocation, a calling to ourselves, distinctive, spare, strange'. How do we respond to that call, and to follow Christ?

Jesus himself was called to be distinctively himself, the one who saves; his incarnation made it a physical reality that the disciples could see and touch and experience. As they too were called to proclaim the Good News in both word and action; so are we called to do the same, with the living Jesus incarnated afresh in us each and every time we respond to that call. But we have a choice, God gives us, always, a choice....and it's a choice we should particularly consider afresh at this opportunity – the start of this year. When we are called by name, how will we, like the shepherds, respond to that call – in the face of such difficulties in the world around us; difficulties with our families and friends; difficulties of others who are on our streets, homeless, poor, hungry. How will we respond so that we might be defined not just by name – but by both name and action? We must pray hard to firstly hear the calling which is individual for each of us; and respond willingly to go where God might be calling us – however uncomfortable that might be. We have a choice; so that at the last, when our names are revealed, will we be defined by the achievements and things we have accrued for ourselves or in terms of what we have done for others, through Christ's love. Responding to God's call, willingly following to be distinctively named ourselves by following Jesus' lead, will guarantee that our definition will be for the sake of others first before ourselves.

May I wish you all a very Happy New Year – and may God bless us all, by name, in the fresh promise of God's countenance upon us in this new year ahead of us, as we respond to that call – in Jesus' name!

Amen.

Revd Dr Mike Kirby