

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The Baptism of Jesus

St Michael's Cornhill

Sung Eucharist

Sunday January 10th 2016

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‘What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.’

Of all quotations from William Shakespeare, whose quattro-centenary of death we remember this year, that quotation must be amongst the most popular. But it’s quoted often with precisely the opposite intention to that which Shakespeare intended. For beneath it, of course, runs a deep irony. Juliet implies that a name is as nothing, yet both of them realise that Montagues and Capulets are like poison to each other. Romeo’s passion for Juliet is such that he rejects his own family name. He denies his father ‘*to be baptized anew*’ as he himself says. We all know the tragic dénouement of the story.

Now, our focus today is on the baptism of Jesus. Although we know that baptism is far more than a *naming ceremony*, nonetheless one’s name is integral to one’s personality, character and entire existence. Naming is part of the sacramental action. Listen once again to the beginning of that powerful passage from Isaiah which we heard moments ago:

‘Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you; I have called you by *name*, you are mine.’

The prophet sets these words within the most portentous context. It is the Lord who creates all things, the Lord who formed Israel who speaks.

‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you: *I have called you by name, you are mine.* That is the punchline and those same words are used every time someone stands before the bishop for confirmation. The bishop says to the confirmand:

‘God has called you by *name* and made you his own.’

Those words are spoken as the person is anointed. Immediately afterwards the bishop lays hands on the head of the individual and confirms. It is a powerful moment.

None of us, of course, is unaware of the power of the name. Think back to school days. If a school master or school mistress reprimanded a pupil, he or she would likely as not say: ‘*Bloggins*, come out here’, or ‘*Bloggins*, you are in detention tonight.’ Maybe in a girls’ school it was just a little more genteel: ‘*Brenda*, stop talking’, or ‘*Brenda* behave!’ Even so, the mention of one’s name was almost terrifying enough, before the threat of any sanction.

What, then of the Baptism of Jesus? What is the significance of *his name*? Well this is something I shall never again forget, on account of a significant humiliation! Every Christmas when we were in Portsmouth, there would be a really splendid service, in the Cathedral, in the run up to the great feast. It was called simply the ‘Christmas Tree Festival.’ It would gather at least a couple of hundred or more people including squadrons of children. Each year a different member of the chapter, that is, a different Canon would lead the service.

This year it was down to the Canon Pastor, who was a most excellent priest. He began understandably by talking about Jesus. What did his *name* mean? None of the children knew. So Richard, the Canon presiding, looked further afield. The Dean, an astute man with his wits about him, literally dived down and concealed himself beneath the grand piano. I was less easily protected, being in the congregation with my wife and two small sons. ‘Ah, let’s ask the Canon Theologian’, as Richard was always wont to describe me. My mind was a perfect blank! I could remember nothing. ‘Good gracious’, beamed Richard, ‘fancy the Canon Theologian not remembering what Jesus’ name means.’

It was a brilliant piece of theatre. No-one there – least of all me – would ever forget again the background to Jesus’ name. It means, of course, ‘He who saves’. It’s the same name as Joshua in the Old Testament, he who leads people to new life, to salvation, across the Jordan. Today Jesus also heralds new life, as he’s baptised in the Jordan. Baptism is not *just about naming*, but with Jesus, the name tells everything. With God amongst us in Jesus, the world can never be the same again. That’s the most powerful message of any New Year. As we heard from Isaiah:

‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name; you are mine.’

Amen

Readings

Isaiah. 43. 1-7.

Acts. 8. 14-17.

Luke. 3. 15-17, 21-22.