

Year A, January 1, 2016
Feast of the Holy Name/First Sunday After Christmas
Christ Church, Mexia

Today, which is the first Sunday after Christmas, is also the Feast of the Holy Name, because it falls on January 1st. The Feast of the Holy Name takes precedence; we know this from page 16 of the BCP, which is so much more than just an order of worship service. Sometimes it is complicated being an Episcopalian, but I love being one!

So, Feast of The Holy Name... What's in a name? "A newspaper ad read: 'Lost - One Dog. Brown hair with several bald spots. Right leg broken due to auto accident. Rear left hip hurt. Right eye missing. Left ear bitten off in a dog fight. Answers to the name 'Lucky.'" (Hodgin, 558)

What's in a name? Well, in the first century Jesus was not a totally unique name. Some other historical figures include: Jesus Barabbas, Jesus ben Ananias and Jesus ben Sirach. However, there are some interesting characteristics of its derivation. This name is usually considered to be a compound of two parts, Yeho, a theophoric reference to YHWH, the distinctive personal name of the God of Israel, plus a form derived from the Hebrew triconsonantal root meaning to liberate, or to save - or in some cases salvation. So it certainly sounds like an appropriate name for the Son of God, and the only *one* to live up to that name is the one we call our Lord Jesus Christ.

As the Rev. Ken Kesselus says: "The name given to our Savior at his formational service was divinely ordained, as witnessed by the angel who told Joseph to take Mary as a wife and name the child she would bear 'Jesus,' as a promise that he would save his people - save them from their own sinfulness, (as indicated in the account given in Matthew). And so the name became a holy one for all time and for all humanity. Jesus - as the one who connects our humanness to all that is God - saves us from the selfish, sinful nature that is so easy for us, alone, to give in to. The name of Jesus is so important that Saint Paul instructs us in today's epistle that it is 'above every name.' It is so sacred that 'at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend ... and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The name of Jesus has been used for centuries, especially by members of the Eastern Church, as a form of meditation of the highest order. The 'Jesus Prayer,' coming 'from the heart,' allows meditating Christians to delve into the depth of faith in a mystical way. Repeating over and over again the words, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner,'

enables the one who prays to focus on the essentials of faith and to live life in the keeping of our Lord. The nearly subconscious repetitive focus on Jesus, the one with the holy name, enlightens and enlivens the believer to connect with the savior in deepening one's spirituality and finding motivation to provide for the needs of God's children.

Obviously, 'Jesus' is a name unlike yours and mine – or anyone else's. It is now reserved for the Savior. This would logically lead all who are aware of the epistle to the Philippians to refrain from naming a child 'Jesus.'" But, (you may ask) if it is so unique now, why are there currently so many boys and men in Christian-oriented Hispanic communities with this as a given name? Anglos are often surprised to encounter them, though such individuals are usually called by the Spanish pronunciation – 'Hay-SOOS.' This apparent confusion is explained by understanding that such cultures use 'Jesus' differently from other Christians, because it is for them just another common name for males. When they refer to the Savior of the gospels, they do not use Jesus (or Hay SOOS), but rather 'JesuCristo.'" So with this exception (and possibly some few others), Jesus is generally not used among contemporary Christians for naming children.

Usually, when parents are expecting and contemplating the future of their child, they often spend a great deal of time deciding on the baby's name. Some choose family names or something that sounds good with the family name. Some are selected from famous people or a memory/event/value, hoping the child will emulate them in some way.

But Ken suggests that: "Maybe, just maybe, we have it wrong in making 'Jesus' out of bounds for such a task. Maybe we should give everyone the middle name of 'Jesus.' In this way, each of us would carry the Holy Name on our birth certificates, driver's licenses, and passports. Jesus would become more solidly a part of our identity. This might help us remember the invisible cross placed by a priest on our foreheads at baptism, marking us forever as a possession of JesuCristo. With a name like Jesus to live up to, wouldn't our Christian lives become much more enriched?"

An interesting thought supported by William Barclay in *The Letters of John and Jude*, in which he writes: "In Chrysostom's sermon on how to bring up children he advised parents to 'give their boys some great scriptural name, to teach them repeatedly the story of the original bearer of that name, and thus to give them a standard to live up to and an inspiration for living when they grow to manhood.' Isn't that great? (he continues) You know what your name is? Child of God. Work on that." So this idea goes back many years and is something to ponder, especially when we consider the following.

In his book, *In the Name of Jesus*, Henri Nouwen reminds us that: "While efficiency and control are the great aspirations of our society, the loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and a deep sense of uselessness fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world.

Bret Easton Ellis' novel *Less Than Zero* offers a most graphic description of the moral and spiritual poverty behind the contemporary façade of wealth, success, popularity, and power. In a dramatically staccato way, he describes the life of sex, drugs and violence among the teenage sons and daughters of the super-rich entertainers in Los Angeles. And the cry that arises from behind all of this decadence is clearly: 'Is there anybody who loves me? Is there anybody who really cares? Is there anybody who wants to stay home for me? Is there anybody who wants to be with me when I am not in control, when I feel like crying? Is there anybody who can hold me and give me a sense of belonging? Feeling irrelevant is a much more general experience than we might think when we look at our seemingly self-confident society."

So, what's in a name? A lot. As Br. Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE, puts it, "Christmas is not about the arrival of a new philosophy, nor of a new religion, but the arrival of a person – a person who stands with me and holds me and strengthens me – whose words and actions and sufferings make sense of my life – and who can transform my life with a love that is stronger than death." A person named Jesus.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.

Amen