

The Name of Jesus

Luke 2:15-21

January 1, 2012

I.

Happy New Year! Christmas is coming to an end, and we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord next Friday. Then begins the Season of Epiphany during which we recall the events that revealed the divinity of Jesus. At least we do that in the church. In the community, however, we also describe that same season as Carnival, or Mardi Gras, and we recognize other kinds of royalty.

In addition, this is the last Sunday you will see these beautiful decorations around the altar. In preparation for the Epiphany, our Flower Guild will carefully disassemble these parts of the visual story of Jesus' birth, and put them in a safe and secure place so we can enjoy the story again next Christmas. They will put Jesus back in a box for another year.

And then it seems that all of our Christmas lights and Christmas parties just seamlessly evolve into Mardi Gras lights and Mardi Gras parties without the slightest interruption. But wait, not so fast. Let's back up. Something didn't sound right, did it?

How can we put Jesus in a box? While we certainly can place these iconic pieces of the manger scene in storage for another year, we cannot do that to the real Jesus. He is everywhere in the world through the Holy Spirit, and cannot be contained. He is the foundation of our faith and our hope of salvation every day.

And I pray that we know and live that truth even though most of us, including myself, will participate in our long standing tradition of Mardi Gras in some way or another. I am confident that together we still will worship our Lord in spirit and truth over the next seven weeks as these stories of Jesus, as God's Son, unfold from Scripture.

II.

Today we get a preview of coming attractions. The cover of our service bulletins tells us that this is a special day in the church. January 1 always is the day we celebrate the Holy Name of our Lord Jesus Christ no matter the day of the week upon which it falls. And when that day is a Sunday the Holy Name celebration takes precedence over all else.

And so let's explore something about names in general as we set the stage to consider what Jesus' name means. Many of you are wearing name tags right now. It's sort of a tradition at St. Thomas, more or less, although not strictly enforced.

But we do it because names are important. They proclaim who we are and identify us to each other. They introduce us to visitors. They remind us we are part of a community.

And sometimes names are valuable. Last October the Mercedes Benz company spent millions of dollars to get its name on the Superdome in New Orleans. The law also protects trade names that businesses use to describe their products.

And we often take selecting names seriously. Naming our children is a good example. I also imagine a lot of thought was given to deciding that our church would be named St. Thomas many years ago. And how about the unique names of the streets of Diamondhead?

Names also can convey meaning. Sometimes they distinguish the good guys from the bad guys. Remember Star Wars and Darth Vader. Darth Vader. Doesn't that name sound really sinister? Or how about Jezebel? How many mothers today would consider that name for their daughters?

III.

And so, now that we are thinking about various aspects of what names are and what they can mean, let's bring our discussion back to the readings. We have just talked about names of bad guys, and so we now can shift to the good guys and the name of the ultimate good guy, Jesus.

Jesus was not named by his mother Mary, but by God's instruction. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary he told her the child's name would be Jesus (Lk. 1:31). Then an angel appeared to Joseph in order to reassure him about his future wife's unexpected pregnancy, and also told him the baby's name would be Jesus (Mt. 1:21).

And because the original New Testament was written in Greek, the name Jesus is an English translation of a Greek version of the Hebrew name "Joshua" or "Yeshua," which means "the Lord helps," or "the Lord saves." We do not know whether Gabriel spoke to Mary in Greek, Hebrew, or a heavenly language, but it is clear that God, like many fathers, chose to name his Son.

And, just as background, Jesus was not an unusual name in the culture of the time. As we heard during Holy Week last year, the prisoner Pontius Pilate that released instead of our Lord was named Jesus Barabbas. More specifically, it was Jesus Bar-Abbas, meaning Jesus the son of Abbas (Mt. 27:16). Paul, in his travels, encountered a false prophet named Bar-Jesus (Acts 13:6).

So as our Jesus was growing up he actually would have been known as Yeshua Bar-Yosef, or Jesus Bar-Joseph in English. And Christ was not his last name, but rather is the English translation of a title derived from the Greek word *Christos* (*Christos*), which meant "the anointed," and was used to describe the rightful king of Israel.

And during Jesus' life on earth only he referred to himself as fulfilling that title (Mk. 9:41, Jn 17:3). It later was adopted by the Gospel writers who recognized and proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ, hence his description in the English Bible as Jesus Christ.

And, of course, Jesus also bears many other names in the Bible, such as King of kings, Lord of lords, Messiah, Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, Redeemer, Savior, and Son of God, among others. These all offer a preview of God's plan to offer salvation to humanity through a human being who shared God's divinity.

So the Feast of the Holy Name that we celebrate in church today is linked to Jesus' destiny on the cross. God intended that his name would describe his purpose. And in his name we offer our prayers and worship, and in his name we seek his blessing.

IV.

This leads to how we treat Jesus' name today. Obviously the Third Commandment tells us we shall not take the Lord's name in vain. That now includes Jesus as well as the Father. And Jesus did not have a middle initial. We know in our hearts whether our references to Jesus are worshipful, or said in some other way for which we should seek forgiveness.

And what about our practice of ending our prayers by saying we offer them "in Jesus' name?" Every Collect in the Book of Common Prayer specifically refers to the name of Jesus in its closing phrase. And every prayer for the various purposes set forth in the back of the Prayer Book also specifically mentions Jesus by name just before the "Amen."

John's Gospel often is cited for praying in Jesus' name. Seven times over two chapters Jesus told his disciples to pray to the Father in his name (Jn. 14-13-16:26). Mathew reassures us that when two or three are gathered in his name, he is in the midst of them (18:20). Throughout the Book of Acts, Paul and the other apostles specifically said they were acting in Jesus' name.

But, on the other hand, Jesus also gave his disciples, and all humanity, the Lord's Prayer as a way to pray, and Jesus' name is not explicitly part of that.

The answer is that today, and ever since the crucifixion and resurrection, we always pray in Jesus' name and with his authority as we thank God, or petition God, or ask for forgiveness, or communicate with God for any other reason.

The Bible and the Prayer Book tell us that Jesus is our only mediator and advocate before God, and that we cannot reach God if we exclude Jesus (1 Ti. 2:5, BCP 155, 330, 395, 572). The Catechism proclaims that prayer is "Response to God, *through Jesus Christ*, in the power of the Holy Spirit" (BCP 856).

There is, however, no specific formula we are obliged to follow. When we pray according to God's will or to glorify or honor God, that prayer is effective whether or not we literally use the words, "in Jesus name." And if we pray selfishly, or unrighteously, then adding those words at the end is meaningless.

But adding those words at the end of a prayer can be helpful in reminding us of the seriousness of what we are doing. A practice of saying that we are praying in Jesus' name, or through Jesus, or with Jesus as our advocate, can help us remain focused on the relationship we have with Jesus as the Holy Spirit leads us to speak with or listen to God.

And so, prayer is from the heart. It is substance, not form. But part of that substance is knowing who Jesus Christ is and that he mediates our prayers. And our faith teaches us that Jesus' Holy name, which we celebrate today, is an essential part of our prayers whether we specifically say so or not.

The basic question here is why do we think Jesus died on the cross? It is only through his work on our behalf that we have any hope at all. We come before God's throne of grace not in our own merit, but through the merit of Jesus Christ. No other name will help us, and so it is natural to want to use it in prayer.

V.

This is consistent with today's reading from Philippians. Paul said, "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (2:9-11).

Paul did not intend these actions as mere gestures, or as repetitive routines, or as things we just do in the background. Rather he called us to honor Jesus' most Holy Name in our prayers, in our lives, and in our hearts, knowing that our faith will be deepened and enriched. *Amen.*