

Sunday 1 January 2006: The Naming of Jesus

What's in a name?

Readings: Numbers 6:22-end; Luke 2:15-21

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

At the church where I was curate in Newport, our Christmas crib figures were damaged during a break-in. A member of our congregation generously offered to buy some news figures, asking only that they were dedicated in memory of her beloved West Highland White terrier, Robbie. So our crib duly had an ox, an ass, a camel and a Westie. In some puzzlement I said to John, the Vicar that there was strong scriptural evidence for the shepherds' dog bearing a name other than Robbie. "There is?" he said. "Yes" I said. "The dog's name is obviously Haste". "So the shepherdess went with haste." I can no longer hear that sentence without developing a mental picture of an eager border collie and a scene from one Man and his Dog.

Naming the shepherd's dog may be going a bit far, but we have added all sorts of names for characters on the edge of the Christian story – Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar, the wise men; Anne and Joachim, the parents of the Blessed Virgin, Mary. Later in the Gospel story we have what's become known as the parable of Dives and Lazarus, although the rich man is not actually named in the Gospel and tradition has even given a name to the penitent thief – Demas or Dismas. Names add humanity to the story and help to relate us to the people involved in the action. But names also say something about the sort of person we imagine these characters to be – so for example, the names Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar seem to add to the mystery of the visitors from the East rather than detracting from it.

The names given to children may also say something about the things we hope for them. There are ghastly stories about children being named after entire football teams – perhaps with the hope that in doing so the child will be blessed by the collective talent the names convey. Or more often a child carries a name of another family member, and perhaps with it the hope that he or she will grow up to embody something of the characteristics of that person. And it's not just family hopes - names go in fashions, saying something about the wider community of the time.

I can't help thinking that Mary's pondering must have been full of hopes and dreams for her son as she tried to take in the astonishing circumstances of his birth. Perhaps her pondering went as far as the name which he would carry – Jesus – for, Matthew's gospel tells us "he will save his people from their sins". That's a big expectation for any child to carry – not just the dreams of his family but the weighty hopes of a whole community – the community whom our reading from Numbers told us, the name of the Lord himself rested upon. The name Jesus – Yeshua or Joshua in the Aramaic, conveys a real sense of community history.

That sense of community history is there in the familiar yet still glorious blessing we heard in the book of Numbers:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

As with so many of the words that we use in our liturgy, the deeper sense of those words can often be lost amidst the familiarity. For that blessing carries within it the hopes of the community of God's people – the longing for salvation which the one who bore the name Jesus would carry.

The blessing is one for a time of departure, journeying. It's given to the people of Israel by Aaron the high priest as they set out on their wilderness longings – and perhaps we can imagine that each day would begin with that blessing – reaffirming all it carried for those on whom the Lord made his name to rest.

As with so many translations, we lose some of the richness and hidden meanings which are there in the Hebrew words, but we still pick up a sense of God the source of life and wholeness both to the community of faith and to the whole created order. God's blessing to his people is wide-ranging and touches every sphere of life. "The Lord keep you" specifically means safety, calling down God's protection from all evil – particularly pertinent to wilderness travel.

"The Lord make his face to shine upon you" is a wonderful contract to the God who has sometimes been hidden – here the graciousness of God is visible for the whole people to see.

The lifting up of the Lord's countenance has a sense of movement and action, in bringing peace, shalom. Not merely an absence of conflict but a sense of wholeness, fullness of life – a sense of community purpose and wellbeing. And the blessing concludes with the promise that the Lord will put his very name on these people as he blesses them.

Here is what the promise of salvation means for the people of Israel. It's about wholeness and wellbeing for the whole of creation. This isn't about saving individuals from the general fate of humanity. This is about setting free, and living in the light of the shining face of God.

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Luke's account of the birth and childhood of Jesus has the mark of a historian, but Luke is also concerned to tie up this history with the lives and hopes of the ordinary people. In so doing he also has a wonderful way of bringing together the routine with the miraculous. So he is the one who tells us about the visits to the Temple, as a week old child, with his parents a few months later and then as 12-year-old boy – and each time the child is connected with this community history.

For the week-old child, he is connected to this community history through the act of circumcision, symbolic of the covenant with Abraham. Moreover this child is connected with this community history through his name – his name shall be Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. This child who bears the name of Saviour hasn't come to siphon off an elite by assuring them of a privileged eternal destiny. This child has come to bring salvation to the world as it is – to bring God's blessing and peace. In the face of this child the Lord does lift up his countenance upon his people and make his light shine in the darkness. This child will deliver his people and all of creation from the corporate sins of prejudice, injustice, violence, exploitation and neglect as well as the personal sins of selfishness, mistrust, complacency and envy that work against the wholeness and shalom that is God's blessing for his people.

The name of a child makes that promise a human one – one we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands. That is what the mystery of the incarnation is all about.

And the ongoing mystery continues to be seen among us who bear not just our own names but the name of Christ - individually through our baptism, corporately through our being the body of Christ.

It's seen among us who in continuity with the history of our faith community are those on whom the light of God's blessing shines still. We too are called to live the miraculous among the ordinary, to make the presence of God real in the places where we live and work, to strive for the wholeness and shalom that is has been and remains God's will for his created order. Through our lives as God's people today we like Aaron and his sons before us are called to live the words of God's wholeness and shalom for a broken longing world.

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.