

Sunday 13 April 2008: Fourth Sunday of Easter

Named By God

Readings: Acts 2.42-end; John 10.1-10

Last week, among those who are preparing at St Martin's to be confirmed or received into the Anglican Church, we were discussing the meaning of our names. The names that were chosen for us at our birth or the names or the names that people gave to us perhaps later in our lives.

*"What's in a name, that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet."*

What is in a name? It is obviously far more than simply a word or a sound: it contains all the meaning and all that you associate with the person who has been given that name. The name is what calls them, conjures them up in your mind, triggers the link – and the memory... symbolises the relationship you have with them. In the group many told of how they had been named after a beloved member of the family or of how, when choosing the name for their newly born child, a particular name had just seemed to feel right for the life of that child. Others seem to find their true name later in life. I went to visit Mallie Lightbourn in hospital last week and saw on the label on her bed that she is called Marion. Marion didn't feel right at all for Mallie is the name of the person we know: Mallie Lightbourn, full of light, courage, stubborn uncontainable generosity and strength of spirit: "Now I want to arrange a time when you and your friends are coming to dinner", she said with both arms in heavy plaster. Definitely still Mallie, not Marion

This week there was an obituary in the Guardian for Gloria Taylor who died last week from a heart attack after suffering blood pressure. Gloria was the mother of Damilola Taylor, the 10 year old who was fatally stabbed in the leg by a teenage gang in November 2000 on his way home from Peckham Library in South London and bled to death in a stair well. His name and smiling young face became familiar across in newspapers and news bulletins in the aftermath of this tragedy. But also for those who noticed the presence, in that rush of media, his mother Gloria. Gloria, despite her immense grief, never spoke of vengeance or hatred, she showed a dignity and a goodness and belief in justice in such incredible contrast to the brutality of her son's death. Gloria and her husband Richard formed the Damilola Taylor Trust to raise money for projects which target the cycles of family breakdown, truancy, drugs and gang culture which lead to violence. Damilola was her last born unexpected son. That is why they called him Damilola which means "Gift from God" He was a gift from God.

Throughout the Bible naming becomes a very important and significant sign that our lives are gifts from God and that by naming we are called into relationship not only with one another but the creator. Creation is named by God as it is called into being. In the book of Numbers we read this blessing:

The Lord bless you and keep you,
The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
So they shall put **my name** upon you and I will bless you.

(Numbers 6.25)

The name is a sign that God is creating people peculiarly his own, called into mutual knowledge of one another and partnership. The name is the sign of our personhood and also that personhood does not stand alone. We are named by others and without significant others naming us and relating to us we have a very isolated and fragile sense of self. We have often heard that situations of the most extreme deprivation and torture are characterised by the loss of name and identity whether it be in orphanages, institutions for the elderly or handicapped or a prison or concentration camp. One of the most moving and important services I have attended at St Martin's is the service at St Martin's each year where homeless people who have died on the streets in the last year. Each one of them is named and their names brought and written down at the altar in a sign that they are remembered before God.

In our Gospel reading today we are told that the good shepherd knows each of his sheep by name. This is Chapter 10 of John's Gospel. It comes immediately after the story of the blind man whose sight is restored in chapter nine. The context of the Good Shepherd narrative is significant. The whole of chapter nine, which has preceded it, has been the story of the discovery of personhood through the meeting of the man blind since birth with Christ. This is the story of one who has been excluded since birth: forced to beg; his personhood denied and his suffering even seen as the result of sin or the sin of his parents. The meeting of Christ is not simply a miraculous moment, it is the story of God's empowerment - of what it means to be recognised by God and called into relationship. Here is someone who does not even have a name or a voice - he is "that one, a him, recognised only by his blindness and his begging. Even when his eyesight is restored others go on talking about him in the third person as if he is an object - until he changes all that: the excluded has become the included one for the first time. He takes the stage "It is I he declares " I AM, the man", echoing the name of Yahweh. From a sub person without a voice or name, or membership, or dignity, he has become one included by Christ, one who is now capable not only of speaking out for himself but also for others. The victim has become the witness and more than that a fine and Christ gifted interpreter of the things of God. The dependent is now the adult, growing in confidence and fluency and playfulness as he reverses the roles. And he himself now sees and progressively recognises the name of the one who has included him and called into relationship. "He is a man..." "a man called Jesus..." "a prophet..." "one from God..." "the Son of Man"

It is now that we reach the story of the Good Shepherd. This is not an image of meek passivity as we may first have imagined. This is not the Christian church 'baba-ing' in a sheep fold frightened, dependent and nervous of any one else getting in who may not be the same as them: this is the expression of a shepherd who calls us into relationship. A God who includes... includes by being the very gate by which we enter. He is the opening, the means and the way to belong both to him and to one another. Neither is it some sort of fenced enclosure for the righteous. The Shepherd we are told leads in and leads out. There is both freedom but also the knowledge of belonging. There is relationship but also the move out of the fold into the world. And although there is a sense of divine authority in this image there seems no hierarchy. These sheep may all look the same to those who do not know them but each one of them is unique and the shepherd knows each one of them by name. Similarly we are not simply a mass, a group, a category, a race, a gender, a sexuality a type, righteous or unrighteous: we are those who are named by God, know his voice and listen for it amidst all the prejudice and the vitriol and even when the voice of the majority seem to be denying that personhood and dignity. And what are the marks of this shepherd, what is it that makes him different from the thief? John states the contrast boldly and simply: the thief is the one who comes only to steal kill and destroy. "I have come that you may have life, have it abundantly." A simple contrast perhaps and yet a fundamental question for the dignity of human life, the life of our creation. Where do we and the choices we make or support, or at least silently acquiesce to, lead us? To whom do we belong? The one who steals, kills and destroys or the

one who gives life? The question may seem naïve and yet how often the choices and cycles we get sucked into as individuals or groups, institutions and nations deny the very fullness of life we claim to serve. The calling of each one of us by name is not something remote or out there or once in a life time. It is the intimate calling to fullness of personhood both for others and for ourselves that each one of us may be presented with many times each day.

And what about this Church of ours, the Anglican Church as we approach Lambeth, are we listening to the voice of the one who is the gate, who calls each, each one by name and promises life in abundance? Last week The Archbishop of Canterbury added his voice to protest about death threats made to the leaders of Changing Attitudes in UK and Nigeria and assaults upon their supporters in Nigeria because of their campaign for the human rights of gay people. Archbishop Rowan said “The Anglican Communion has repeatedly and unequivocally condemned violence and the threat of violence against gay and lesbian people and I hope that this latest round of unchristian bullying will be universally condemned”

A few weeks ago I was asked to help pray for someone seeking asylum whose life had been threatened. He told me that he was gay and that his sexuality had been exposed back home. He had been “outed” in his own country and he had been sent insults and threats. And then in the post he had received a magic curse saying he was an abomination, cursed and would die. Since receiving the curse he had been unable to get a job and everything seemed to have gone against him. He said that he was so full of fear. He said he prayed about it, but he did not know the answer, for that is what he was, and had always been ever since he could remember.

I asked him what he thought that God thought. He told me that in Leviticus it condemned him. I asked him what he thought Christ thought. There was a silence. “Christ accepts me”. “All of you?” “Yes all of me. All of me, for this is who I am -its how he made me.

God calls us by name - all of us - our love, our sexuality, our hopes and our fears all that we are, all of our lives. We are told we are made in his image. All of us. Our sexuality is part of our name, part of our calling; it is not curse it is blessing: the calling to be fully human and to honour the name and uniqueness of the life in others. It draws from the well of our full personhood.

It is fear that steals, kills, and destroys. When we know that we are loved, fully loved and named the light pours through - like this window - all is transfigured - and healing comes - and not only are we able to receive new life but to give life to others... and that love is good - it is all that we are.

Paul said: *“Now I know only in part; then I will know fully **even as I have been fully known.** And now faith hope and love abide, these three and the greatest of them all is love.”*