

"What's in a Name?"
Sunday, September 3, Proper 17
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"What's in a Name?" Juliet said to Romeo, caught as they were between two feuding families; the Capulets and the Montagues but loving hearts beat within them as she said; "Romeo, Romeo, doff thy name and for thy name which is no part of thee take all myself". ~Romeo & Juliet Act 2, Scene 2, lines 47-49.

As naming was relational to Romeo and Juliet, so it is for all Teachers who must learn their students' names. So too must clergy when they come to a church. As I continue to learn your names, I also continue to be grateful for your wearing name tags. Knowing names builds relationships.

Likewise we seek to know God's Name. So let me ask you this about your relationship with the Holy Name; can you remember your first experience of God, or Jesus or the Holy Spirit? Has there ever been a time when the "Holy" has touched your heart? Your life? How? What have your subsequent experiences of God been like? Or have you always been an Episcopalian and like a fish to water, God is so much a part of your life, you don't notice it simply because you "live and move and have your being in God"? Still, has there ever been a time when the word "God" became an existential experience to you? The word is more than three letters and a single syllable. God is a living encounter.

In colloquial English we use so many expressions involving the word God;

- God bless you
- O my God!
- O for the love of God
- Good God almighty!
- God forbid!
- God only knows!
- God rest his/her soul
- God willing
- God works in mysterious ways wonders to perform
- Honest to God
- Let go and let God
- There but for the grace of God go I

When you think about it, the word "God" takes a prominent place in our lives, our experience and in our hearts.

Apparently Moses was trying to avoid God and problem of slavery and oppression in Egypt. So he took up tending to the flock of his father in law Jethro. One day while minding his own business he came across this extraordinary sight. There was a bush on fire. Yet it was not consumed. By the way you can see what is called the burning at the foot of Mount Sinai in St. Catherine's Monastery, the

oldest monastery in the Christian world. When the bush shimmers in the desert winds it appears to be on fire.

Whatever the case, what Moses saw was fire, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses turned aside to see this great sight. He could avoid it no longer. It seemed at first like an angel and then clearly this was God. It was an encounter with The Holy; what we call in Biblical Theology "A Theophany"; literally a showing or revelation of God. Moses removed his shoes because the very ground he was standing on was holy.

In Celtic Christianity there are what we call "thin places" on earth; places where the distance between us and God seems somehow nearer. Places that seem to take your breath away like Iona in Scotland, Holy Island in Britain or Mont St Michel in France. I feel it in places like this or in the lives of those who suffer. Never do I feel the holy more intensely than in that sacred moment when I walk with someone to that last great moment when we stand together at "The Gate of Heaven".

And so it was that Moses had an "Honest to God" encounter with the holy at the burning bush. God spoke to him and said, "I have seen the misery of my people. So have you."

God spoke to Moses somewhere deep in his heart and from the burning bush; "I want you to go down to Pharaoh and tell him; "Let my people go!" It was a dangerous thing to do.

You can imagine, going to any tyrant and telling him something he doesn't want to hear. History tells us again and again that those in power don't take well to criticism and do not like their policies questioned no matter what the moral implications. In fact tyrants like to make up the truth as they go along.

You can imagine Moses' reluctance. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" ~Exodus 3:11

God's response is fascinating. I'll give you a sign Moses. "When you have brought them forth out of Egypt you shall serve God upon the holy mountain." ~Exodus 3:12

Moses may well have questioned such a sign. After all, that was well in to the future. So quite naturally, Moses presents God with a follow up question: He might well have said; "Look, all the nations around us have Gods. The Egyptians have Ra, the Babylonians have the Baals, the Midianites have Baal-peor and Ashteroth, the Queen of Heaven. How about us? Who shall I say sent us? Tell me, if you will, "What is your Name"?

Here the Biblical narrative reaches deep into the nature of Being itself. "You go and tell my children "I AM WHO I AM" has sent you. This is my Name forever: "I AM."

Now then, for the linguists among us. In Hebrew there is what we call the "aorist" mood of a verb. In English we have the indicative, the imperative, and the subjunctive, but there is no such equivalent mood in English so it is a bit challenging to catch the full sense of the translation. Here we have the "aorist" of the copula verb "to be". The verb requires in its nature a coupling of one thing to another. When God reveals the Divine Name, God "couples" the Being of God to the Being of humankind.

Thus when God says "I AM" he also requires you to say "I am" too. Obviously the "I AM" of God is in all CAPS, whereas the "I am" of the human being is in small letters. Apart from God I am nothing. But with God and in God we come into relationship with the Eternal nature of Being itself.

The great Hebrew mystic/theologian Martin Buber, postulated that the very relationship between God and humankind is based exactly on this very kind of encounter. I AM, says God. "I am" too says I. Thus the I-Thou connect in the very act of being. And because God is eternal and without end, when I love God I too become eternal and without end. And when we love one another the eternal, unending nature of the sacred relationship is established among us all. We become the people of God.

Back to the grammar for a moment. The verb "to be" in this case is actually in the third person. So at yet another level of translation it can be rendered to mean "God will cause to be". In other words, God is not to be understood to be a nationalistic symbol like other nations have when they speak of their gods. The God you encounter at the bedrock of your heart is the God of all history.

So when any people find themselves in bondage and in suffering, God will act in history and bring them up out of slavery and into the promised land. The message of freedom is not for the children of Israel alone but for any people finding themselves in bondage and in suffering. God will act again and again in history.

When you take that journey within to that place where the living God comes to life in your heart of hearts, honest to God, you will find a God who will act in your history and in the history of all those who mourn, the poor, the meek, the oppressed, the elderly, the little children, the persecuted, the ostracized. Isn't this what Jesus teaches us in the Beatitudes?

In today's Gospel, Peter didn't get it; the part about suffering and death. But let's be fair to Peter, who does? I sure don't like getting old and arthritic. Sometimes it hurts so bad that I'm driven into myself so far that my fear and dread are all that I can think of. Fair enough.

But Jesus, rebukes Peter and the rest of us out of our fear and our self consuming dread. "Look," says Jesus, "The Son of Man must endure great suffering and death before he knows the power of God's resurrection."

Interesting, Jesus Names himself the Son of Man. In fact he does so 81 times in the Gospels. That is to say he is not only the essence of God, but your essence also. Jesus is fully God. Yes. But Jesus is fully human too.

As Jesus is one with us in our suffering and death so too he is one with God in the victory over sin and death. In the Name of Jesus we become one not only in his suffering and death, we also become one with him in his glorious victory over sin and death.

This is where the rubber hits the road for Peter and the disciples of Jesus. Go ahead, take up your cross and follow Jesus. The Cross and the Crown are two sides of the same experience. For the Son of Man is also the Son of God and he has come to us in the person of Jesus where the two natures meet. And the word "God" has come to life.

Into today's Epistle, Paul proclaims that the change in us is so profound that we can "Bless those who persecute us." We can; "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly" We do "not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all." We "live peaceably with all." We are "not to be overcome by evil, but we overcome evil with good". ~Romans 12.

So what's in a Name? Your name, my name and God's Name? It seems that in a name there is something of the essence of who we are. There is the sacred encounter where we learn to love, forgive, and reconcile, but above all where we encounter something holy, eternal and everlasting. That is why I end my sermons

In the Name of God; the Most Holy, Undivided, and Everlasting Trinity. Amen.

Fr Paul