

Sermon

January 1, 2017 | The Feast of the Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Text: Matthew 1:18-25 | Preacher: Jack Seymour

January 1st is the Feast of The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It is probably not a feast day that you are particularly familiar with. You might be surprised to hear that it is a "major" feast day of the church ranking up there in importance with The Annunciation and The Transfiguration. I am sure that many of you have no idea what they are about either but let's just say that the church has always felt that thinking about the name of Jesus was a very important thing to do. So, let's take a moment and do just that - what's so important about Jesus' name?

Let's start with the fact that neither Mary nor Joseph chose it. If you remember, the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and instructed her to name the child "Jesus" or "Yeshua" in Hebrew which literally means "God saves". The name "Yeshua" was later translated into Greek and then later still into Latin and then from Latin into English as "Jesus".

I bet that you didn't know that Jesus was not the first or only person named Yeshua in the bible. Moses' right hand man was named Yeshua but somehow that came down to us through translations as Joshua even though in Hebrew the Joshua of the Old Testament and Jesus are both named Yeshua in Hebrew. However, the point is that God obviously felt that it was important what name his incarnate son should be known by.

When God came into the world he was making it crystal clear by his name what he was going to do while he was with us - God was the author of salvation and that was exactly what God was going to do - save us. Jesus - God Saves

The Church has also felt that the act of naming a person is important and should be taken seriously. At our own baptism we are made into Christians but we are also given as an essential part of that sacrament our Christian names. We are often blessed with the name of a saint or a saintly relative in the hope that we will be to some degree defined by the name we are given.

Names matter and they have power - clearly - both in the very specific names we apply to individuals and also in how we broadly sum up a person by naming them with a flattering or not so flattering name. Honey, sugar, lover are some of the most familiar flattering ones. Let's try on a few examples of the not so flattering yet definitely powerful names: racist, deplorable, nasty woman, misogynist. Summing up a person and naming them with a single word or phrase is a powerful act and as a powerful act it can

be a prophetic blessing and it can also be a dangerous curse both to the one being cursed and to the one engaged in cursing.

Pope Francis was recently so moved by all of the naming going on in our election and in the press that he felt the need to speak by calling out the media for their capitalizing on name calling and slandering others; reminding us that "The communications media have their own temptations. They can be tempted to slander and then use slander to smear people, above all in the world of politics, he added that this behavior can turn into defamation and nobody has a 'right' to defame another." Defamation may be permitted by free speech but it is still deeply harmful and clearly an act of judgmental hatred.

Perhaps it would be better to return to the old advice that in a debate of ideas it is right to criticize the idea and wrong to criticize the person with the idea. I pray that in the new media vernacular that is taking shape in our nation and around the world this old advice will not completely lose its value.

I don't want to lose sight of the fact that as followers of Christ we are called to name an injustice and equally called to act to correct it. We are clearly immersed in that responsibility here at St. Paul and the Redeemer. In the world, silence is usually misinterpreted as agreement and we must correct that misinterpretation if our silence is used to further injustice. If one feels called to speak truth to power - it must be done - regardless of the consequences.

However, there is an ever present danger of equating one's personal sense of what is right and just with God's. Here lies the danger.

How does one discern the difference between God's call to name an injustice and our own ego's desire to get its way in the world? In other words, how does one know that it is God's call to name and act and not the ego's desire to get one's own way? Or even worse, to put oneself forward as more righteous than the other guy.

There is no easy answer to that question and I certainly don't have a simple formula for you. I can give you some things to think about though. Get input. Speak your concerns to others (not just those who you know will agree with you) and end the conversation with "what do you think?" Ask God. Prayer and reflection have a good track record. Self analyze with someone who knows you and can help you see your motivation. Determine

if you are speaking about the injustice from your heart with love, compassion and a yearning for change or are you primarily making yourself feel more righteous than the other person. Most importantly – did Jesus name the injustice? Remember always that Jesus was in the world but not principally focused on the world.

Well that wasn't much help; I think that I just made it more difficult.

I know there are many other ways to discern God's call to just action in the world but my point is that naming a person or an injustice is a deep responsibility with serious consequences. We are indeed called to it and are best armed with humility when we engage an unjust world that is expert in defamation.

As Jesus reminds us in John:

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.

Would you pray with me please?

Dear Lord, hear my plea for justice. Listen to my cry for help. Pay attention to my prayer, for it comes from a heart striving to be honest with you, with myself and with those whom I love.

Help all of us to love our neighbors more than we love ourselves embracing our common fear and hope.

Break our hearts for the things that break yours. Help us to be your echoes of mercy and whispers of love.

Use our hands to extend help to those who are in need of it. Guide our hearts to an everlasting peace.

Help us to realize that an aching world is waiting for us, your followers, to be instruments of justice, and stewards of Your Word.

In all things I pray thy will be done, not mine.

AMEN