

Year B, Christmas 1, The Naming of Jesus, 31st Dec 2023

Isaiah 42: 1-9

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3: 13-17

So here we are, on the 7th day of Christmas, and this year it is also New Year's Eve. The Festival of the Naming of Jesus, which is actually tomorrow, is one of four major Festivals of the Lord that we celebrate in the church year. The others being the Presentation, the Annunciation, and the Transfiguration.

It seems a bit strange to celebrate the naming of a child, doesn't it? And for it to be up there in the second rank of important days to be kept and celebrated in the church.

But then again, for those of us who have had to choose a name for a child, it feels a very real responsibility. To think you are saddling your child with a name that it will retain for its life. Perhaps we chose names because they are a way of remembering and respecting a family member with that name, perhaps. Or a film star, or a footballer maybe? So, modern choices of names in our society reflect one way of choosing a name. Other societies chose other ways, such as a sense of the new-born child's character, or an auspicious natural phenomenon such as a full moon, a rainbow, a owl's hoot, or whatever.

In the ancient near east naming a child was not taken lightly. Names were important for identity and meaning for the individual as a member of a community. The names chosen by the parents were significant to the circumstances of the child's birth or the potential destiny of the child. In the Jewish tradition in 1st century Palestine it was the father's right to name the child, although I am sure that even in that patriarchal society the mother would have had a say.

We know that in Hebrew, Moses means 'to draw out'. You will recall that as a baby he was saved from death by being drawn out of the water for Pharaoh's daughter. As a man, Moses became the leader of the Hebrew people and led them out of slavery in Egypt to freedom.

There are examples in the Bible where someone's name is changed because of a change in their circumstances or perceived destiny. After Saul's conversion to become an apostle of Jesus to the Gentiles in the Roman Empire, his name was changed to the Roman name, Paul. Jesus changed the Hebrew name of his disciple, Simon, to the Greek name, Petros, which means 'rock'; Simon became the foundation for Jesus' mission to the world. We of course, know him as Peter.

The final verse of the reading, verse 21 from chapter 2 of Luke's gospel, states:

'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.'

The naming of a child in the ancient Hebrew culture was ceremonial, particularly if the child was the first-born male child. After eight days, a baby boy was circumcised and given his name. The name given to Jesus was not chosen by Mary and Joseph. His name was chosen by God and separately told to them both by the angel Gabriel before the baby was born. Well, I suppose that took the pressure off Mary and Joseph having to choose a name! But why Jesus? Well, of course, the name the angel told Mary to give to her Son wasn't Jesus. Jesus is a Greek form of his name, and we have adopted that because the New Testament was written in Greek. The Hebrew name that the angel uttered, and chosen by God, was Yeshua, or as we will be familiar hearing it said, Joshua.

So why would God choose that name? What is its significance? Yosia is the Hebrew verb for 'he who saves', and Joshua or Yeshua means, 'Yahweh is salvation', or in language more familiar to us, 'The Lord saves' or even more simply put as, 'Saviour'. When Gabriel told Mary and Joseph to name the child Joshua, it is a clear signal that God had a special plan for this apparently insignificant baby. He was named to show that his role in life was to save God's people from their sins, to be a route to their salvation in God. That plan would be revealed gradually over the years.

The significance of his name was understood by his early disciples and followers. His name meant that he was anointed by God to bring salvation to the Hebrew people. His name, Joshua, was more than a reference to the

ancient hero, Joshua, who I am sure you will recall, was given authority to lead the Hebrew people into the promised land, after the death of Moses. His name meant that he would save the people again.

This Joshua would save the people by restoring them to the covenant between God and God's people, first made by God with Abraham.

This Joshua was sent by God to lead the people into a new salvation.

This Joshua was sent by God to lead the people into a renewed spiritual relationship with God. The people could choose to be free from oppressive religion which obscured God's love.

Even though we now recognise and respect the name of Jesus, we need to never lose sight of the meaning of his name. His name provides us with a message of hope for all of God's people. God is with us. God's saving grace is always at hand to provide hope, courage and strength for now and forever.

I have met a lot of people named in different cultures, and especially in Africa. For example, I had a friend whose name was 'Fortune', and one lovely friend from Botswana called 'Witness', and I knew a man called 'Goodwill' from Nigeria. What lovely names. In naming a child that name carries the hope and promise for what the child will bring to the world.

As we thank God for the birth and naming of Yeshua, Joshua, Jesus, 'Yahweh is salvation', 'the Lord Saves' or simply 'Saviour', we can give thanks for the birth and continued gift of hope in every child born today, and in all our tomorrow's.

And one final point for you to consider. Instead of making one or more New Year's resolutions – if you are like me they tend not to last much beyond the end of January – why not consider an attribute you would like to cultivate this year. If you could give yourself a new middle name, that would describe an attribute you would like to develop in 2023, what would it be? An attribute that would be good for you, and for God's kingdom breaking through each day. Think about it – you may wish to consider the fruit of the spirit for inspiration if you need to (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). Maybe in two weeks' time, when I am next here, you may wish to let us know what name you wish to give yourself, as a sign of

who you want to be in 2023, the attribute you wish to nurture and the destiny you wish to influence.

Happy New Year to you all.