

## Readings for the Naming of Jesus

1<sup>st</sup> January 2023

### First Reading: Numbers 6:22-27

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

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.

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

### Second Reading: Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

### Gospel: St Luke 2:13-23

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste

and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

When the eighth day came, 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.

### **A Reflection for the Naming of Jesus**

‘What’s in a name?’ So says Juliet in Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*. She goes on: ‘What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.’ She is telling Romeo that a name is nothing but a label, a convention with no meaning. She loves the person, not his name – an important distinction for her given that the two lovers came from warring families, he a Montague and she a Capulet. Juliet may have wished for their family names to be unimportant but, as she found out, names are often significant and powerful, and they give us identity ... and more.

Throughout the ancient Near East, and continuing to this day in some cultures, names were important for what they signified and were not simply a label to distinguish someone. They carried with them a description of the person or thing named. So, people chose names for their children very carefully because the name should describe some aspect of a child’s character or identity. A ‘good’ name would say something about who the parents hoped and prayed their child would become. As we heard two weeks ago, the name ‘Jesus’ is the equivalent of Joshua which means ‘God saves’. Through the angel, God had ordained that this child would be known as God’s salvation, God’s deliverer, God’s rescuer.

At the time of Jesus, it was traditional in Jewish practice to name a male child at the time of his circumcision on the eighth day after birth. Today is the eighth day of Christmas, the eighth day after Jesus was born, and the day on which he was named in accordance with that Jewish tradition. And Luke emphasises that the name given to the child, Jesus, was the name stipulated by the angel to both Mary and Joseph before he was born.

It was from this tradition that the Christian custom of naming a person at their baptism developed. The words ‘I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’ are prefixed by the given name or names of the person. Therefore, the name given to you at your baptism is more than just a label or your identity, it is your Christian name - your name under God, the name by which you belong to God. And just as, in Christian baptism today, parents and Godparents are charged with nurturing the child in the Christian faith, so too in the Jewish ceremony would Mary and Joseph have been charged that Jesus must be raised as prescribed in God’s Law.

What’s in a name? Both the name, ‘Jesus’, and the obedience of Mary and Joseph, point to the destiny of the child whose mission is to save us and all people. Jesus came from God; he was made man and lived among us, submitting to the Jewish Law, in order that a new relationship between God and his people could be established – not just for the Jews who had long-anticipated such a time, but with all of humanity. In his name, our Salvation is revealed.

Prior to Jesus' birth, the Jewish people only knew a God who was distant and terrifying, so far from the people that God's name could not even be spoken or written in full. A God who, when he spoke to Moses from the burning bush, warned him not to look at God or he would die (although later Moses, but only Moses, met with God face to face). A God who Elijah attempted to glimpse in wind, earthquake and fire but only found him in the still, small voice.

Now, in this little child, in the person of Jesus, God draws close. He offers the possibility for people to speak not only about God but to God and to see God's face as they did so. God now had not only a name but a face as well.

In today's passage from Philippians, Paul affirms his conviction that, in humbling himself and being born in human flesh, obedient to the point of death on a cross, Jesus has the name of God himself. The name that is above every other name is that of God, and God gave that to Jesus. Paul makes this link explicit at the end where he says, 'Jesus Christ is Lord'.

This was both a statement of faith and a political statement of that time. By saying that 'Jesus is Lord' and that his name is above every name, he is asserting that Jesus is above everything and everyone. Paul is denying that position to the Roman Emperors, many of whom were worshipped as gods, claiming it as a right, and to other earthly powers. Instead, Paul says that 'at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow': all people will ultimately be subject to Jesus and pay him honour and worship. He adds emphasis with 'in heaven, on earth and under the earth', signifying the whole universe, and including every creature.

What's in a name? When that name is 'Jesus', I think we can safely say 'everything'. Through baptism, we bear his name. Everything we are and will be is of God's love and creation and we are infinitely precious in his eyes. So precious, he sent his Son whose name tells us that his mission is to save us.

I'd like to conclude with a sonnet by the modern poet Malcolm Guite who writes:

January 1st brings us not only to the start of a new year but to a lovely little festival of the church: The Naming of Jesus. It is an amazing thing to think that the Eternal Word of God, the Logos from whom all languages and all meaning ultimately derives, should deign himself to be named and to learn a language alongside us.

### **The Naming of Jesus**

I name you now, from whom all names derive  
Who uttered forth the name of everything,  
And in that naming made the world alive,  
Sprung from the breath and essence of your being.

The very Word that gave us words to speak,  
You drank in language with your mother's milk  
And learned through touch before you learned to talk,  
You wove our week-day world, and still one week  
Within that world, you took your saving name,  
A given name, the gift of that good angel,  
Whose Gospel breathes in good news for us all.

We call your name that we might hear a call

That carries from your cradle to our graves

*Yeshua, Living Jesus, Yahweh Saves.*