

Fourth Sunday of Easter

29th April 2012

Acts 4: 5-12; 1 John 3: 16-24; John 10: 11-18

John Dunnill

Alleluia, Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed. Alleluia.*

Because of the Gospel reading, this Sunday is often called 'Good Shepherd Sunday'. The gardening group has been so keen to celebrate this day they've been spreading sheep poo all round the churchyard. Perhaps naming the day helps you to identify the faint aroma of woolly droppings. But I don't want to talk about sheep or their products, I want to talk about names and the Biblical theme of the Name of God.

Now, names in our culture are not very significant things. They are basically pointers, to distinguish one person from another. 'I Tarzan, you Jane', and so on. Actually two people alone in a jungle or on a desert island don't really need names – 'hey you' will do just as well – but as soon as we have a crowd, we need names to note the difference.

These aren't much more than pointers to tell us apart, and what the names *mean* doesn't matter much. I expect most of us know the original meaning of our names, and perhaps you find them interesting or significant, but I bet you don't spend much time thinking about them.

We know there are cultures where people have even less interest in names: children may be simply named One, Two, Three, Four and that's it. But there are others (including as it happens the ancient Hebrew culture of the Bible) where the meaning of names is given high importance. It matters for the story that Adam has a name which means 'earth', Jacob has a name which means 'heel-grabber', and Jesus has a

name which means ‘salvation’. All these are more than pointers: they say something about the heart and character of the person.

It’s clear that the author of the Acts of the Apostles is interested in names. The story we heard today is part of a sequence that has been running over three Sundays, beginning with the healing of a lame beggar in Acts chapter 3. Oddly we never learn the lame man’s name, but we learn the name of the temple gate where he sat: the Beautiful Gate (no prizes for guessing why). And he is healed by Peter ‘in the NAME of Jesus Christ of Nazareth’.

We heard last week how Peter explained to the crowd who this Jesus was, giving him a whole list of names which link him to God: ‘God’s servant’, ‘the Holy One’, ‘the Righteous One’, ‘the Author of Life’, ‘the one whom God raised from the dead’, ‘the Messiah’ [3: 13-15, 18]. None of these are merely pointers, of course, they take us some way towards understanding who Jesus was and what made him special in relation to God and God’s purposes.

But at the centre is the name ‘Jesus Christ of Nazareth’, a name repeated in the part of the story we heard today, when Peter and John were arrested and charged by the authorities. They are asked ‘By what power or by what NAME did you do this?’ (note the connection of a name and power) and they reply, ‘This man is standing before you in good health by the NAME of Jesus Christ of Nazareth’.

Now even the name *Nazareth* does more than point – point to the place where Jesus happened to be born. It’s an unimportant village, but the gospel writers clearly find it significant, and I think it’s because they connect it to the Hebrew word *netser. Netser* means a shoot and it’s used in one important text, Isaiah 11: 1 ‘a *shoot* shall come forth from the stump of Jesse … and the Spirit of the LORD shall rest on him’. Jesse was the father of King David, so the text is promising a new leader descended from David and filled with God, the messiah, the Christ. The name ‘Jesus Christ of Nazareth’ calls up these rich associations which show why he is the one through whom God is acting now.

But there is more going on than even this. If you look at the front of the pew sheet you will see a tapestry of Bible verses saying something (often something rather odd) about the NAME. To say ‘those who call on the NAME of the Lord will be saved’ (it’s from Joel 2:32) is clear I guess: if we are in trouble and we call God by name, God will respond to help us. That presupposes we know who God is, we are not calling on some vague divine power but on the God revealed to Israel as personal and as caring, the God of the covenant.

But other are less clear. What do we mean when we say, in the Lord's Prayer, 'hallowed be your NAME'? Why are we asking God to hallow or honour or bring glory to his NAME, is particular?

We've seen that names are more than pointers. They tell us something about who someone is, their character, their nature. And using someone's name has the power to make that person present. If I name *Janice*, who is not here but on the other side of the world right now, you become aware of her even though she isn't here; in a way her name conveys her presence. So in the Bible the NAME conveys a sense of someone's presence and power. And especially this is true of God.

There's a key idea in the book of Deuteronomy (which I accidentally failed to print here) that the NAME of the LORD dwells in Jerusalem [Deut. 12: 11]. In Israel's tradition God was not to be worshipped just anywhere, but God chose to be worshipped in one place only, in the temple in Jerusalem, and it was said that God's NAME dwelt there. Notice, the Jews didn't think God actually lived there in the sanctuary – or if some did, they were put right, because God is holy and does not live in any place, but God's NAME (God's being and presence and power) was somehow present there, and that was the best place to call on God.

But what the New Testament proclaims is that that divine NAME (the presence and the power of GOD) does not now dwell in the temple in Jerusalem, it dwells in Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel recalls the text which says 'his NAME shall be called Emmanuel, meaning God-with-us' [Matt 1:23]. St Paul says God has given Jesus 'the NAME which is above all other names', the name of GOD, so that to him 'every knee shall bow in heaven and earth and under the earth' [Phil 2:9].

What has caused this momentous shift is the resurrection. It is resurrection power that we see in the freedom and boldness of the apostles as they proclaim this truth. The New Testament says that when God raised Jesus from the dead – however we understand that event – he placed in him the NAME which previously dwelt in Israel, and in its Temple in Jerusalem.

This is why, in this story in Acts 3 – 4, the leaders of Israel are being challenged (in Jerusalem, and under the shadow of the temple) to recognise what God has done. And

it's why Peter lays it on thick when he calls him 'Jesus Christ of Nazareth, crucified by you but raised by God'. Israel's leaders have rejected God's chosen one, but in the resurrection God has confirmed his choice: so now the apostles say 'there is no other NAME under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved'.

'No other NAME'. You can say that with Easter joy, or you can say that with an air of exclusion and absoluteness about it, and even an air of threat: either believe in Jesus or else. I've heard it used to argue that there is no worth or value or power in any other faith or philosophy than Christianity. I don't believe it says that, if we take it out of the context of judgement and confrontation between the leaders of Israel and the leaders of the new community, competing to claim possession of God's NAME and blessing.

'No other NAME'. This could tempt us into using the NAME as a mere pointer to which club we belong to. Are we Jesus-people or Moses-people? Are we Jesus-people or Krishna-people? Are we Jesus-people or Dawkins-people?

I am personally very happy to call myself a Jesus-person, but not in that contestive or competitive sense. There has got to be more to it than saying 'our God's better than your God'.

Listen instead to what St John says in the Gospel and the reading from his first letter. Jesus says 'I am the Good Shepherd'. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he puts himself at risk, lays down his life for his sheep. In laying down his life, Jesus shows the mark and NAME of the God of love, the love poured out in all creation and calling us at every moment into fullness of life.

Jesus in his action of total self-giving represents the NAME and nature of GOD, and we are called not just to see that but to follow it. So 'this is God's commandment, that we should believe in the NAME of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us'.

We know that believing in the NAME of Jesus is not about signing up to a programme, or entering into competition about who's right and who's wrong; and it does not happen in our head it happens in our hearts and bodies, when we make his way of life our way of life, when we love one another not only in intention but in action.

That's challenging enough but it isn't about judging other people, it's about letting *ourselves* be challenged and empowered to live by the love shown in the crucifixion and by the life-for-others revealed in the resurrection.

Does the NAME of God (the presence and power of God revealed in Jesus Christ) dwell here in this Christian community? Is God's NAME hallowed and honoured among us by what we think and say and do, and the way we think and say and do it? Whether or not we feel we can affirm that, we do need to affirm that for us the risen Christ, bearer of God's NAME, is not a distant figure in history: he is a life dwelling in us, that we are given to live.

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