

Holy Name of Jesus

07.01.2018
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Introduction

Jesus the infant is formally named at his circumcision. What does the story of the naming of Jesus have to offer us today about rites of passage around naming and its significance in a Christian context? And what power or impact do names, or naming, have in the context of war and conflict?

Text

Luke 2: 15 – 21

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. But 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, as it had been told them.

Jesus Is Named

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.

Comment

The naming of a child is a testing act by all accounts. Deciding on a name that will be with a child for life is weighty. In the case of Jesus's naming, however, there was no doubt. Earlier in this Gospel (Luke 1:31) Gabriel tells Mary: "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus." And in Matthew's version of the story (Matthew 1:21) the angel instructs Joseph: "you shall

call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins,” linking the naming of this child to the salvation of all people. The naming of this child was no random act.

The name Jesus used in the English New Testament comes from the Latin form of the Greek name *Iēsous* (I sōus), which itself is a rendition of the Hebrew *Yeshua* (יֵשׁוּעַ), related to the name Joshua. The Hebrew root of this name is ‘rescue, deliver’ which has led to translations including ‘salvation’ and ‘saviour’, linking back to Matthew’s words to Joseph: “for he will save his people from their sins.”

The use of the name Emmanuel (God is with us), prophesied in Isaiah (7:14) is not mentioned in the New Testament, but is echoed in Matthew (28:20) when Jesus says: “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”

The deliberate naming of this child, who became the Christ after his resurrection, explains why there has been such a focus on, and veneration of the Holy Name of Jesus since the first century. Picked up in prayer rituals (‘we pray in and through the name of Jesus Christ’), underpinning the lives of religious communities (e.g. The Society of the Holy Name) and liturgical rituals (e.g. the Feast of the Holy Name), this short passage in Luke’s gospel carries great weight.

Used in petition, in prayer, following the instruction of Jesus himself and of Paul, the Holy Name carries weight and gives power. See John 16:23 “If you ask the Father anything in my name he will give it you.”; Romans 10:13 those who “call on the name of the Lord” will be saved; Philippians 2:10 “in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.”

But what of names and naming today? T.S. Eliot in his ‘Naming of Cats’ famously devoted a series of poems to the rituals and meanings of naming, underscoring the weight that formal and informal names carry, and testifying to the fact that the meanings of names can influence, or describe actions and characteristics of individuals.

In many cultures, our name carries a signifier that can harm or mark us in a destructive way. In situations of conflict, names rooted in our religious or historical tradition can mark us as part of the ‘in’ or ‘out’ group according to our stance. Names given with pride, delight and reverence can become names weighted with fear, terror and even death. A name can be a fearful and terrifying public marker of a stance or belonging that can evoke violence, and even lead to death.

In parts of our world this ‘marking’, or public identification is taken to a different level with the act of scarification, where identity is etched deep into the brow. At a certain age, often as young teenagers, deep scars are etched into the forehead or brow or body to mark tribal, clan or family belonging. A process perhaps initiated to induce pride, has, in some cases fueled horrific war. This process and other forms of public identification, or scarification (e.g. the yellow cross in WWII) has meant that in some cultures, where peaceful life has been disrupted by ethnic cleansing, tribal warfare or violence, our identity has been etched into our brow/pinned on our clothing in such a way that we cannot escape violence or even death.

‘Sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me’ was a playground chant in my childhood. Yet in sectarian Scotland, we knew, without blinking, that children with certain names would go to one school or the other, and that the shared playground between our Catholic and non-denominational primary schools had to be monitored at breaks to stop tribal fighting across religious lines.

Calling names may not have broken many bones, but the names with which we had been born (our 'givenness', according to Margaret Silf), could swiftly turn from badges of honour, to placards on our brow inciting fear and violence.

(For an overview of the rite of circumcision, its social and historical context, and the implications for us today see the comment on this text offered for January 2017 <https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/readings/24/holy-name-of-jesus>)

Response

Consider your own name, or names, why they were given to you and what they mean.

What does your name signify in terms of your tribal, cultural or religious belonging?

Consider the power of names in religious contexts where they have been used to incite violence or war. Consider other public identifiers (e.g. the yellow star, or scarification) where symbols of pride have been used to aid massacre.

What response have our churches made in the past to bring peace in these contexts, and to reach for a deeper identity? What further responses could be made?

Prayer

Holy God, Prince of Peace;
Emmanuel, God with us;
Wonderful Counsellor –

Loving God of many names
we bring our whole selves to you:
the whole of us, known by you before birth,
the whole of us, known before naming.

You know and love us beyond
label, pedigree, lineage or genetics.

In, and through your holy name
we pray for all scarred or killed
because of their name,
and ask your blessing on all
new-borns named before you today.
Amen.

